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vs RS6 & PORSCHE

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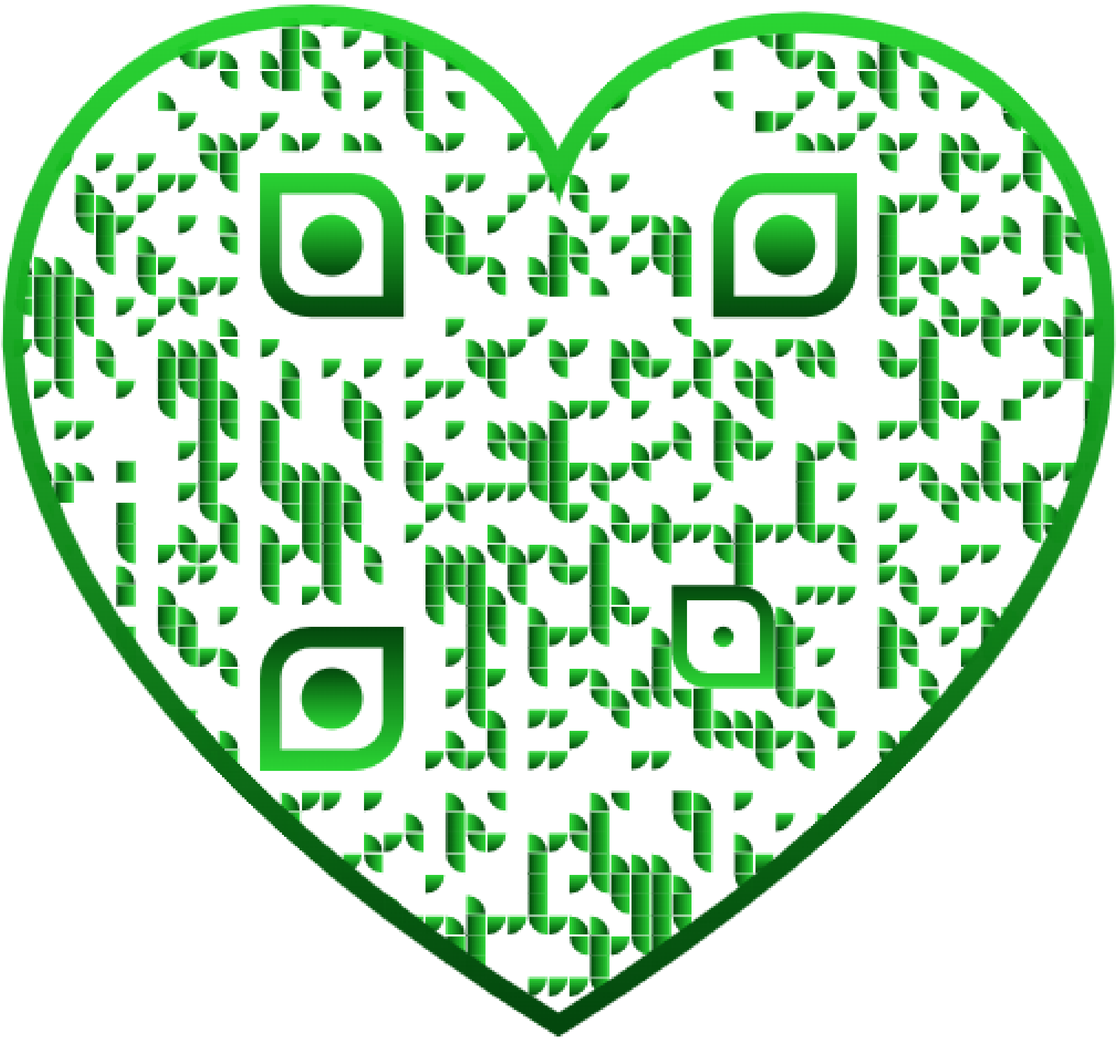

THE NEW X3

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Search BMW X3.

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Forget everything you thought you knew about Jaguar. Here's the future

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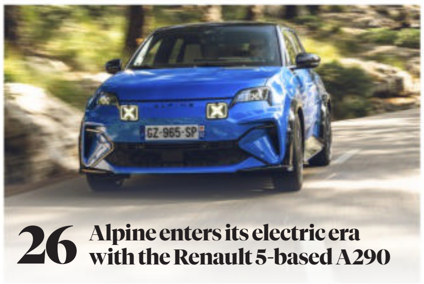

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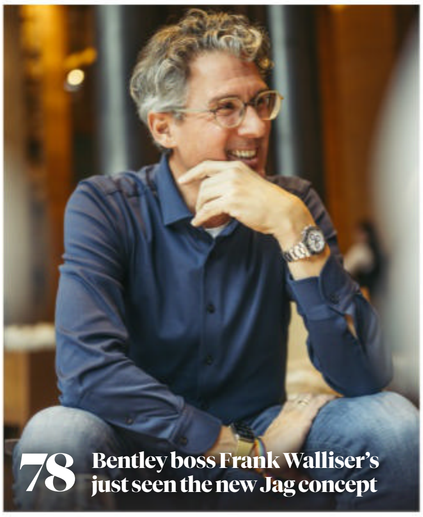

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Welcome

Some of these name changes seem pretty significant

When *Small Car* magazine rebranded itself as *CAR* in 1965, it wasn't because our predecessors had lost faith in the importance of Minis. Rather, they decided there was a strong thread uniting good cars of all sizes, and it would be better not to create arbitrary distinctions. A positive renaming.

Compare and contrast with Hermes, which acquired a bad reputation for its ability to deliver parcels – unfortunate when your business is delivering parcels. So Hermes became Evri. A negative renaming.

In the automotive world, there's been a lot of activity around proper nouns of late. It's not immediately apparent where on the *Small Car*/Hermes axis these changes sit, but some seem pretty significant. Generally they're drawing a line under a phase, especially an awkward lurch into electrification.

BMW is ending the use of 'i' as a suffix. Originally short for 'international', it came to signify 'injection' and later became a handy indication that the car had a petrol engine, whereas a 'd' suffix meant diesel.

But it's all become very messy of late, with 'i' as a prefix meaning electric and 'e' meaning hybrid; big 'X' means SUV and little 'x' means all-wheel drive. It's still messy, but reserving 'i' for prefix-only deployment is a start. Although how long it will be until we all stop instinctively saying 'i' after 325 is another question.

Audi has also been trying to apply a bit of logic. From now on, odd number means engine and even number means electric. Whereas previously the A4 was the saloon and estate and the A5 was the coupe, now A4 is electric and A5 is combustion, with a choice of bodystyles. Mercedes, meanwhile, is gently beginning the process of binning EQ. The latest G-Class line-up includes an electric version that's badged G580 rather than EQG580. The rest will follow.

Volvo, in similar vein, has a rolling programme of rationalising its naming strategy. It's small beer, easily decoded. For instance, the electric XC40 and C40 are now the EX40 and EC40 – proudly electric.

There's much less of a positive spin to be put on Alfa Romeo's beyond-last-minute decision to rename its smallest crossover as Junior, rather than Milano, the name it had been trailing for months. That was the result of a political clash, not a strategy, but it meant the car got a lot more publicity than it otherwise would have.

There are plenty of other examples, some of them quite extreme. Like Audi – again! – adding fresh layers of bafflement by launching a Chinese joint venture with SAIC called AUDI, in capitals, without the four-rings badge; the concept looks very good, but the naming might take a while to settle down.

But there's also a change that is definitely all positive. It's Hyundai's request a couple of years ago that in the doggedly monoglot UK we stop mangling the name as a vaguely phonetic 'high-un-die' and try a bit harder to pronounce it as the company itself does: 'hyun-day', with just two syllables thanks.

As Jake Groves explains in Agenda in this issue, Hyundai is a shining exception to the industry's widespread current flailing about in search of better excuses and extra slack. Hyundai seems to be the front foot; a company that actually enjoys making cars.

Colin Overland
Production editor

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Is this the last time we'll put a new BMW M5 up against its long-standing Audi foe, the RS6? We've captured the moment on video.

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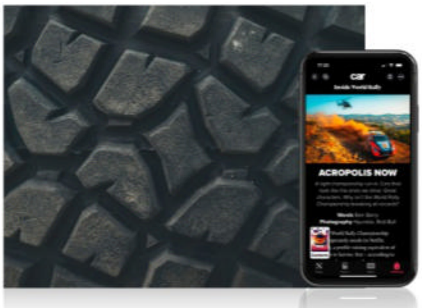

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Agenda

EN LUTTE
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IQUE !

WOLFSBURG WOES

Turmoil at VW is just the start

Georg Kacher European editor

Big decisions ahead for execs Blume and Schäfer

▶ **The good life is over at Volkswagen.** With group profits down 64 per cent in the third quarter of 2024 and the core VW brand now operating on a wafer-thin 2.3 per cent margin, the board responded to the mounting trouble and distress by calling for widespread plant closures, massive lay-offs and drastic pay cuts.

Although the powerful unions are threatening to go on the warpath, and there have been heated protests, it is hard to see that the world's largest car maker has any real alternative to implementing some radical cutbacks and internal reforms to get its house back in order.

And it's not just VW – this can easily be seen as a Germany-wide problem. What used to be Europe's strongest economy urgently needs a political reset – how else to reduce the paralysing bureaucracy and excessive energy costs, boost the inventive spirit and finance clean-air gateways, embrace electromobility and cut the mushrooming unit labour expenditures?

You can be sure that Mercedes and BMW will be paying very close attention.

The decline of the VW Group began long before 2015's Dieselgate scandal, which prompted losses in excess of €32bn, damaged the brand reputation for years to come and tied up funds that would have been better spent on an affordable model line-up capable of beating Tesla at its own game. Instead, complacency prevailed, the conservative management became increasingly risk-averse, and eternal prosperity was taken for granted by everyone from the boardroom to the shop floor.

When it should have been speeding up development cycles (at an optimistic 36 months, VW currently gives its Chinese rivals a 12-month head start), streamlining production processes and focusing on groundbreaking new technologies, VW cultivated the cost-intensive yet comparatively unproductive status quo while paying fat dividends to the insatiable main shareholders, the Porsche and Piëch families.

In the course of 2024, the key performance indicators turned from bad to worse. The market spurned both the ageing VW model mix and the fresh EV efforts, while fierce competition from China, Korea, Renault and Stellantis triggered a cut-throat price war. The broader economic slowdown stifled pan-European spending behaviour, not helped by continuing charge and range anxiety, which deterred many potential EV buyers.

As a result, the VW brand is expected to be down by half a million units in 2024, compared to 2023's 9.3 million vehicles, when the outputs are totted up.

Potential image-boosting outliers such as the ID. Buzz are too expensive and not sufficiently advanced, while future heroes like the ID. 2 and ID. X are still at least two years away. The ID. 1, to be shared with Seat and Skoda, has been pushed back to 2027 (if it happens at all), and the critical ID. Golf and ID. Tiguan, which will eventually replace the ID. 3 and ID. 4, have been pushed back from 2026 to 2028.

Underpowered, insufficiently flexible, slow charging and lacking range, the original MEB matrix for EVs and its MEB+ update will have to soldier on for at least five more years. In 2029 it is due to be replaced by the allegedly vastly superior 800-volt Scalable Systems Platform (SSP) destined, in various forms, to span all vehicle segments from Seat to Bentley.

But is the all-electric SSP matrix really the royal road to utmost efficiency and profitability? As far as the high-end SSP61 components set conceived for Audi, Bentley and Porsche goes, this may indeed be the case. But whether the smaller SSP41 and 31 versions are equally compelling solutions remains to be seen.

While SSP can, with a bit of goodwill, accommodate a compact rear-mounted range extender (but not a front-mounted combustion engine), we are told the long-running combustion-only MQB Evo and MLB Evo architectures are fit to spawn EV spin-offs. Since the group needs to sell petrol-fed models until 2045 – when China will finally ban combustion engines – electric-only is at this point primarily a European solution.

So to keep its options open, including the potential use of hydrogen and biofuel, VW is contemplating the comeback of an evolutionary scalable convergence matrix ▶

Production continues, but union action could escalate

While Skoda has become the new people's car king, and Cupra is booming, VW has lost its way

not unlike the original Multi-Traction Platform (MTP) conceived by Audi seven or eight years before it was gunned down by then chairman Herbert Diess. A decision on the matter is expected early in 2025.

While Skoda has become the new people's car king and Cupra is happily eating big chunks out of the fast-shrinking Audi pie (sales down 10.9 per cent in the first nine months of 2024), the VW brand has lost its way. Adding insult to injury, VW design has over time evolved from bland to boring, with no signs of a change for the better on the horizon.

In the most extreme option for breaking out of this cycle, the board would like to sack up to 30,000 workers and close three plants: the former Karmann factory in Osnabrück (9300 jobs), which will run dry in 2026 now that Porsche has decided to pull electric Boxster/Cayman production in-house; the under-utilised small-volume showcase factory in Dresden originally built for the upmarket but short-lived Phaeton: and a third that has not been identified but could be the Kassel transmission and axle facility.

Perhaps the time is now right for Oliver Blume to relinquish the chairmanship at Porsche (the Skoda CEO Klaus Zellmer is reportedly a hot candidate for the top job in Zuffenhausen), focus fully on restructuring the VW Group and ultimately take charge of the ailing Volkswagen brand currently run by Thomas Schäfer.

Lack of progress and innovation are leading to low demand for VW's cars and too much capacity at the plants building them. Fundamental adjustments are required to get the bloated giant back on track, but change won't come easy as long as the unions, the supervisory board and the key stakeholders keep disagreeing.

The state of Lower Saxony owns 11.8 per cent of the shares but holds 20 per cent of the voting rights. Porsche Automobil Holding SE's figures are 31.9 and 53.3 per cent. Of the 20 supervisory board members, 11 are shop stewards and two politicians, which means the state and the unions can effectively veto every single decision.

For many years, this was a comfortable arrangement: the workers allowed the capital side to siphon off fat dividends (€22bn between 2021 and 2023, a whopping €4.5bn in June 2024 alone) in exchange for extensive job guarantees. But since this game plan clearly no longer works, the group must either restructure or enter another round of short-term fixes that will aggravate the underlying fundamental problems.

Workers and politicians are key to VW decision making

INDUSTRY

Hyundai: it knows exactly what you want

Jake Groves Deputy news editor

▸ **After a genuinely fun electric car** for the enthusiast? No one does it better than Hyundai right now. Want an interesting and attractive car for the family, fitted with clever details and 'I hadn't thought of that' touches? Call Hyundai. How about a car maker that's smartly playing the field when it comes to powertrain options, instead of putting all its eggs in the battery-electric basket? Hyundai's got that covered, too. No wonder the brand has just built its 100 millionth car in less time than it's taken any other manufacturer to hit the milestone. The secret? Hyundai is making cars people want.

By comparison, many other manufacturers appear to be going through the motions. The saturated supercar and hypercar markets are struggling to light buyers' fires. At all price points, the direction of travel points to EVs, but buyers – put off by rampant depreciation in some cases – aren't so keen to follow.

Hyundai, like Toyota with its more recent output, has consistently sweated the small stuff and hasn't neglected the car enthusiast – and it's now reaping the sweet rewards for doing so. Most of its cars are attractive, or at least eye-catching, without looking aggressive. 'Beauty, not botox! Just be beautiful!' says Simon Loasby, head of the Hyundai design centre. 'Getting down to the essentials suddenly becomes incredibly attractive.'

The latest Santa Fe is a triumph among family cars, while the Tucson is so convincing a package that it virtually flies off showroom floors, and Hyundai isn't scared of venturing into new kinds of car segments. It's carved out a niche with the Santa Cruz pick-up that helped it set sales records in North America. N, meanwhile, still carries a torch for combustion in certain markets with the fabulously fun Elantra N. Then there's the Ioniq 5 N: such an engaging electric hot hatch that it even held its own in our 2024 Sports Car Giant test, in a field packed with petrol-fired heroes.

Hyundai isn't done yet, either: the Ioniq 6 N and new hydrogen fuel cell model to succeed the Nexo are both on the way, as is a production version of the N Vision 74 show car that briefly blew up the internet – retro done so well it feels fresh as a daisy.

There's also a sense of humour beneath the surface. The RN24 (the caged monster you see here) is its latest skunkworks project: a mutated Inster built from WRC-spec scaffolding and… precious little else.

A distraction, thrown together for the Instagram likes and nothing more, you might think. But no. Remember the RN22e from 2022? It was essentially an Ioniq 6 N in disguise, and a test bed for N's e-Shift and N Sound+ that have helped to make the Ioniq 5 N such a hit. The RN24 demonstrates the possibilities of a smaller, lighter N hot hatch that has the same-size battery as the 5 N – complete with rally-style suspension and even a drift-spec handbrake. It's not about the performance numbers, but 'prioritising the driving experience,' says Joon Park, vice president of the N management group. We may be looking at an Ioniq 3 N here.

'Who knows – our 200 millionth car might be powered by a battery or hydrogen, might be self-driving or even self-flying,' smiles newly-promoted CEO, Jose Munoz. Whatever form it takes, it'll be built by people who care.

RN24
RN24
N
N

So skunkworks the place even smells bad

It's consistently sweated the small stuff, and hasn't forgotten the enthusiast either

LUXURY

All aboard the gilded lifeboat of luxury

Anonymous Industry commentator

Just one Rolls customer gets the Arcadia Droptail

Got the car. Got the boat. Got the island. What's next?

▶ **For a brief period in time** in 2023, a man called Bernard, who sells T-shirts, watches and fizzy wine, became the richest person in the world. His conglomerate, LVMH, which owns luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Möet and Fendi, performed so well on the Parisian stock exchange that it pushed its value up at the same speed as the Nasdaq – where shares in Apple, Microsoft and Amazon trade. Luxury is an irresistible commercial force.

This is brilliant news for legacy automotive brands currently worried about China. The brute force of colossal, relatively cheap labour and vertically integrated production – all funded by lakes of state capital – has helped China become the world's biggest vehicle exporter, its cars heading overseas by the boatload to disrupt the old order. Analysts from bank UBS think the Euro and US brands will lose a fifth of global market share by 2030.

So, which direction should the old school carmakers take? Jaguar, currently re-inventing itself, makes no secret of the fact the main reason its new cars will sell for north of £100,000 is to put them beyond current Chinese competition. Bernard shone a bright golden light on the new western paradigm. Go luxe or go extinct.

For more than a decade the likes of Rolls-Royce and Bentley have found that pushing upmarket is a gilded lifeboat helping them weather a multitude of storms, from worldwide financial collapse and a global pandemic to supply-chain crises and exit from the EU. If the rest of the world's car makers are serious about luxury they could learn a lot from these UK-based players. And success starts by letting your clients run riot…

The irony of wealth is that it becomes impossible to treat yourself. Which is why luxury customers no longer want just stuff; they want access to and influence within their favourite brands – to walk around like they own the place. Directing designers and whispering into the ears of CEOs is valuable. Bentley recently invited a handful of very special clients to meet and dine with senior management on the production line at Crewe. And such activities are exceptional for business.

Aston Martin has Q Branch, Bentley has Mulliner ▶

Not everyone's cup of tea. And that's the point

and Rolls-Royce has Bespoke, all mini empires in their own right, where customers are not only let loose but encouraged to make outlandish requests – so long as their bank balance can back up the bravado.

Bentley saw profits soar to a record £623.7 million in 2022, and in 2023 grew its custom operation by 43 per cent. While revenue for the first half of 2024, a more challenging period, was down on the previous year, €1.388bn isn't too shabby. Neither is an 18.8 per cent return on sales. Rolls-Royce, a brand more coy about its profitability, delivered 6032 cars in 2023, with the average customer dropping more than €500,000 per car that year, well above the list price of its most expensive model.

Aston and Bentley's approach is mostly colour and trim, while also offering limited-run coachbuilt cars like the Bacalar, Batur and Valour, not to mention recreations of their classic icons. Rolls-Royce facilitates the full Roaring '20s coachbuilt experience. These one-offs are an economic miracle – customers happily pay to fill the void between a designer's wildest dreams and the accountants. The result is a customer-funded, roadgoing concept car. To give you an idea of budget, one coachbuilt Rolls-Royce was rumoured to cost £25 million.

Dealerships are all well and good, but you need to be smart to capture the 'ultra high net worth individuals' – people with a net worth of at least $30 million. Ergo, the rise of the pop-up. From Saint Tropez to Savile Row, following the money has been an essential tool for Britain's luxo titans to support both revenue and brand image. In addition to rocking up in places bristling with wealthy travellers, from Saint Moritz to the Côte d'Azur (where Rolls-Royce has summered), they use the pop-up model as a low-cost means to experiment with new markets, and interact with their customers face to face. This flexibility is needed to respond to the speed with which luxury markets emerge.

> **The very top tier includes the possibility of a coachbuilt one-off. This is profitability squared**

While supercar brands can be guilty of splashing their logo on questionable merch, a better-curated partnership can pay substantial dividends, and help elevate an automotive brand's position as a luxo entity rather than a boring old car maker. Aston and Bentley have gone in on property, offering their brand to residential projects in Miami and Dubai. They've imported the tactic from Versace's Palazzo Versace model, Bulgari's Hotel & Residences scheme, and other similar property-luxe tie-ups.

Rolls-Royce's approach is softer. It infiltrates the monied world by funding emerging creatives through its art programme, Muse. If your brand enters the room hand-in-hand with creative talent, an audience of spenders might like you as much as they pretend to like art.

Mulliner is now a crucial part of Bentley's operations

There's no word more powerful than 'no' to a rich person. Telling your customers they're not allowed to buy your expensive new product is a time-served luxury play (see the Hermes Birkin bag, every attractive Rolex and a reservation at The Fat Duck). That's why brands have different tiers of ownership. It begins with a hybrid of linked app and owners' club. Bentley has the Bentley Network and Rolls-Royce has Whispers, both offering invitations to experiences, a concierge and the opportunity to chat to executives as well as other owners.

Once you've got your car, shown your face on the app and turned up to a few showroom events, you might get invited to play on the next level: the limited-edition car. These tend to have more power, sleeker bodywork and off-menu features. They're for existing customers only, and tend to cost between 40 and 100 per cent above RRP. Beyond that, the very top tier includes the possibility of a coachbuilt one-off. This is profitability squared.

Exploiting your heritage is pretty standard practice for a car brand, but the luxo set has wised up to a key fact: the rich are getting younger. Today, the average age of Bentley's customers in some regions is just 39. Crewe has extended its heritage fleet, promoting cars not just from the universally understood 'classic' period but the '80s, '90s and beyond – periods that resonate if you're 39.But heritage comes with a catch – if you're not careful, history can be the only place your brand belongs, which isn't terribly appealing to the next generation of luxury consumer. So Bentley rarely markets a new model finished in its traditional, subdued colour palette, preferring neon oranges, electric purples and nuclear greens. It also has a boosted and blacked-out Speed range, addressing its old-world associations head on and elbows out.

Rolls-Royce has gone even further, aligning itself with 'subversive' customers who, according to the company, 'reject suits for streetwear' and 'use blockchain not banks' with its bad-boy Black Badge models. It works – the average age of an RR customer is just 42 worldwide, and the package (wheels, engine tune, carbon trim and a thorough de-chroming) is a circa-£40,000 option. Ker-ching.

New Flying Spur

MOTORSPORT

Audi in F1: winner in waiting or big-money mistake?

Edd Straw F1 writer

▶ **You can see why people** are sceptical about Audi's prospects in Formula 1, with some current teams confiding they're not sure Audi will ever break through as an F1 frontrunner, despite its incredible Le Mans legacy.

Rumours of wavering commitment have flared up periodically in Germany – most recently triggered by the news that Audi will shut its Brussels plant in February – but are consistently denied. It seems wrong, say the doubters, for Audi to be investing so much in F1 when its main business, making road cars, is going through a lean spell.

But Audi is adamant it is committed to F1. The sport is booming, so the team's value will only increase. Quitting now would be absurd unless there's a buyer willing to spend a 10-digit sum.

Audi's F1 team isn't a start-up. A deal was struck to acquire a controlling stake in Sauber in 2022. The name won't change until 2026, but Audi has been quietly on the F1 grid for two-and-a-half seasons.

Sauber uses Ferrari engines today, but in 2026 Audi's power unit will arrive. Work is well advanced on the 1.6-litre turbo engine, built to new rules requiring a 50:50 split of hybrid and internal-combustion energy. That project is based in Audi's Competence Centre Motorsport in Neuburg an der Donau. As long ago as June 2024, engine project boss Adam Baker said its full power unit 'is running dynamically on the test bench'.

The driver line-up has now been confirmed, starting with Sauber in 2025, and in place for at least the next three years. Veteran Nico Hulkenberg joins from Haas, satisfying Audi's desire for a German driver, with 20-year-old Brazilian rookie Gabriel Bortoleto bought out of a McLaren 'development driver' contract to partner him. Audi CEO Gernot Dollner was keen on a young driver, hence the ousting of 10-times GP winner Valtteri Bottas.

The key personnel off the track are also now confirmed, after a rocky start. When the Audi/Sauber deal was struck Frederic Vasseur ran the team, but he left for Ferrari at the end of 2022, with Andreas Seidl, architect of Porsche's Le Mans successes in the 2010s, already lined up to come in as CEO. A power struggle developed between Seidl and Audi's Oliver Hoffmann, with both ousted in July. In their place came Mattia Binotto, Ferrari team boss in 2019-2022, who took up the dual role of chief operating officer and chief technical officer. In the summer of 2025, Jonathan Wheatley, a key architect of Red Bull's success, joins as team principal.

Sauber needs to sharpen up on track, as the team's regression from sixth-best in F1 when the initial Audi deal was done to the worst right now is an indictment of the wasted time. The fact that number one driver target Carlos Sainz turned down a big-money Audi deal to join struggling Williams is also pretty damning and feeds the scepticism.

Well, at least the logo's sorted

Continental

Drive with confidence this winter

Expert tyre advice from **Steve Howat**, head of technical services at Continental Tyres UK & Ireland, to help keep you safer in bad weather

▶ As the arrival of winter brings with it icy days and dark nights, Continental Tyres is urging drivers to prepare in advance for the wintry conditions.

Freezing temperatures, poor visibility and slippery roads significantly increase the risk of accidents and the potential for drivers to lose control of their vehicle.

A recent study by Continental Tyres found that over half (59 per cent) of drivers feel nervous driving in snowy and icy conditions, while two-fifths (45 per cent) have cancelled plans altogether to avoid driving in bad weather.

Tyre maintenance is crucial in winter since tyres are the only contact between a vehicle and the road. Regularly checking tyre pressure is essential, as properly inflated tyres enhance responsiveness, handling and safety in wintry conditions.

Drivers should regularly check their vehicle's tread depth for wear – this can be done at home using a 20p coin. If the coin's outer band is obscured, the tread is above the legal limit. The legal minimum tread depths are 1.6mm for vehicles up to 3.5 tonnes and 1.0mm for those over 3.5 tonnes. If the outer band is visible, seek a professional inspection. Also, look for uneven wear, damage, punctures, or bulges, which can compromise safety.

When driving in wet and snowy conditions, braking performance will progressively decline with lower tread depths, and on wet roads there is an additional risk of aquaplaning with reduced tread depths.

For drivers navigating cold, wet and snowy conditions, investing in all-season or winter tyres can also make a big difference. For those in milder climates, where winter temperatures rarely drop below freezing, all-season tyres are a great option. Continental's AllSeasonContact 2, part of the award-winning AllSeasonContact tyre range, offers outstanding control in any weather, enhances fuel efficiency and improves safety, making it an excellent choice for all vehicles, including electric models.

Continental's WinterContact 8 S is designed to excel in snow, offering impressive wet braking and dynamic handling on dry winter roads. Its advanced sipe and groove design makes it ideal for both city driving and rural roads.

Alongside tyre maintenance, there are other important safety steps to follow before hitting the road this winter. Ensure full visibility, adopt a smooth and slow driving style, stick to cleared main roads, maintain a safe braking distance and avoid driving in icy vehicle tracks to improve traction and control.

Be ready to face the season's challenges head-on, with confidence.

Zeekr's sleek 007, lurking in its own Bond-villain lair

INNOVATION

China's EVs are winning on tech, not just price

Mark Rainford China editor

▶ **Tesla is often perceived** as the technology leader among electric car makers, but there's a growing band of challengers for that crown. A look at five EVs from China reveals a wealth of smart thinking on batteries, chargers, assistance systems and more, combined with a focus on moving swiftly from drawing board to production line.

Just check out the so-called Golden Battery found in the new 007, a rival for the Tesla Model 3 from Zeekr, part of the Geely group. Zeekr claims to be the fastest-growing electric brand in the world.

Developed in house, the Golden Battery is a 75kWh prismatic LFP power pack capable (on the correct charger) of getting from 10 to 80 per cent charged in just 10 and a half minutes. That makes the 007 the fastest-charging mass-produced EV in the world, claims Zeekr. And Zeekr

Tesla's Model S is starting to look dated, now that some of the competition has moved on significantly

has been rolling out 1000kW ultra-fast chargers within China, so this isn't purely academic.

The 007 has a range of 427 miles according to CLTC, the Chinese equivalent of WLTP and EPA ratings (if unlikely to translate to European and US conditions without losing a few miles); it can add over 300 miles of range inside 15 minutes. That's ahead of any Tesla. With a dual-motor set-up producing 637bhp and 524lb ft, it's also claimed to beat a Model 3 Performance on acceleration.

Moving on from Zeekr to another vowel-averse Chinese brand, Avatr, we find a rival for the Tesla Model S, the 12 (pronounced one-two). This is claimed to have class-leading autonomous driving technology, in the form of Huawei's latest Qiankun 3.0 system. Combined with no fewer than three lidar units on the 12, it makes the car capable of driving autonomously around urban roads in China as well as remote valet parking, where it'll deliver your car to a set space in a parking lot without you being inside.

With Tesla's latest Full Self Driving not available in China, it's hard to give a direct comparison. But the Huawei/Avatr system has proved itself on China's crowded and often chaotic roads, so it should at least go toe-to-toe with Tesla.

We've learned to never underestimate Tesla, but the Model S is starting to look dated now that some of the competition has moved on quite significantly. None more so than the newly refreshed Nio ET7, which will be heading to Europe in the near future.

Launched in 2022 and updated twice since then, the ET7 is the first Nio to benefit from the company's push further upmarket, and now sports a Maybach-busting spec list in addition to Nio's ground-breaking battery-swap technology.

While Tesla's expansive Supercharger network has done a great job of spreading the convenience of reliable charging infrastructure over many territories, Nio has taken a different approach: an owner should be able to acquire a fully charged battery in around three minutes in a fully automated process.

Nio's 2500-plus swap stations have completed more than 50 million battery changes since 2018. The network is very much focused on China at the moment – but when the cars come to the UK, so will battery-swap stations.

The best Nio currently offers is a semi-solid-state 150kWh battery, which boss William Li took on a live-streamed 621-mile drive earlier this year. The 100kWh battery in a Model S can't quite manage 400 miles.

And there's more. The Li Mega is an MPV, launched earlier this year, with bullet-train styling and some remarkable charging speeds for its 102.7kWh battery: a claimed 12 minutes from 10 to 80 per cent.

With peak charging power of more than 520kW and a curve that never dips under 300kW, the Mega's range between charges – 441 miles according to CLTC – is helped by a slippery drag coefficient of just 0.215.

Denza started out life as a joint venture between BYD and Mercedes-Benz. Poor sales and, frankly, poor products led Mercedes to dial its share down to 10 per cent. But of late the brand has flourished. Its flagship is the Z9 GT, with styling that echoes the Porsche Panamera. It's available as pure EV or a range extender.

It has rear wheels that can point in opposing directions, giving the ability to pivot the car around one of the front wheels; drive nose-first into a parallel parking space, then rotate the rear into position by selecting your chosen angle on the centre screen.

This also enables the Z9 to manoeuvre diagonally through tight spaces, and complete a conventional U-turn in just 4.62 metres.

Smart. And, like all of these Chinese EVs, there's also a long list of convenience and infotainment features on the Z9. It's not unusual for these cars' audio systems to feature 20-plus speakers, big screens for rear passengers, fridges, hot-stone massaging and plenty more.

Some of these cars will soon be available outside China, as will much of the tech. And even if not all the claims match up to the closest scrutiny, you can see why some Western manufacturers are sympathetic to the idea of imposing tariffs on Chinese cars…

Zeekr 007 keeps it simple; Li Mega favours cinematic

SUSTAINABLE RACING

The best way for cars to go green? Engines!

Jamie Turner Professor of mechanical engineering

▶ **For 2025** the British Touring Car Championship is changing the basis of its technical regulations quite markedly. Instead of aiming to be more green by improving the efficiency of the cars, the new rules shift the responsibility for decarbonising to the fuel being used. In doing this it is ahead of other major motorsport championships, such as F1 and MotoGP, which will eventually take a similar route.

The previous rules, which used hybrid engines as a way to reduce the CO2 emissions associated with running the series, were analogous to the EU's use of legislation aimed at reducing tailpipe CO2 emissions for road cars. Unfortunately, the laws of thermodynamics mean you can never get to 100 per cent efficiency when you use an engine operating on a heat cycle, and so, as long as the fuel you are using in an engine has a proportion of fossil content, the vehicle will always emit some fossil CO2.

You can bypass this issue by using a fuel with no net CO2 emissions. To do this you have to close the carbon cycle, by taking CO2 already in the biosphere (in contrast to being dug out of the geosphere, which is what fossil fuel extraction is) and turning it into a fuel. This can be done using a relatively straightforward biological process – making biofuel – but unfortunately there is a limit to how much bio feedstock is available to do this. To go the whole distance on fully decarbonising fuel we need to use chemical approaches, and make 'e-fuel'.

The e-fuel approach uses a chemical plant to combine non-fossil CO2 with hydrogen to make a fuel which, when burnt in a vehicle, has no net atmospheric CO2 impact. Ideally, the CO2 is extracted from the atmosphere and the hydrogen is obtained through electrolysis, with all the energy used being renewable or nuclear. The fuels will therefore be 100 per cent green, and you can make them have exactly the same characteristics as existing fossil fuels, with which they can be freely mixed.

It's true that a full e-fuel approach requires much more primary energy than electrification. However, we have no shortage of renewable energy (solar energy impacting the Earth is over 1800 times what mankind uses for everything), so this should not be the primary consideration; the total cost of implementation is far more important. Because all of the feedstocks are free, there is no reason why eventually e-fuels cannot be as cheap as fossil fuels; and in any case we need them for aviation.

It's a step on the path to enabling motorsport to continue with combustion engines

One of the great advantages of using e-fuel to decarbonise transport is that you change only one thing (the fuel) and everything else stays the same, including the fuel distribution system and the vehicles. Furthermore, the compatibility of e-fuels with current engines and fuels means we can head towards decarbonisation in an evolutionary way; going electric, on the other hand, involves changing almost everything at once.

The fuel being used in BTCC is Hiperflo ECO102 R100 from Haltermann Carless. It won't all be made using e-fuel processes but it will be 100 per cent renewable. It's a step on the path to the full greening of motorsport, while being fully 'e-fuel ready'. For BTCC (and F1 and MotoGP) this means racing can continue with combustion engines, which are pretty fundamental to the spectacle. It also means that regardless of e-fuel consumption, the racing has zero net carbon emissions – so it's environmentally directly comparable with Formula E.

It should also encourage a public debate on how we decarbonise transport, and improving knowledge of e-fuels could help save the European car industry.

Porsche's e-fuel plant in Chile: helping keep engines alive

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Thorough stripdown between Moroccan win and Saudi's big challenge

MOTORSPORT

No one wins Dakar in the first year. Dacia could

Colin Overland Production editor

▶ **'The number one rule in Dakar is:** don't have a problem. A problem creates more work that means other things might be missed. So many things can cause problems: the length of the event, the heat, the dust, the rocks…' So says Philip Dunabin, technical director of the Dacia Sandriders project: the Romanian budget car maker's ambitious three-plan to contest the Dakar rally – the world's toughest – for three years.

He's the yin of the operation, drawing on his years of Dakar experience to foresee every possible problem, and make sure there's a solution at hand – a solution that can be implemented by a hot, tired driver and co-driver in a sandstorm, several days into a gruelling two-week race through Saudi Arabia.

'It's the easiest thing in the world to get it wrong,' he stresses. This is him in buoyant mood, still buzzing after the Prodrive-run team's success in its first competitive outing, the Rallye du Maroc.

'Yes, we did well in Morocco: one-two, and all three cars finished. But there's no complacency. Vigilance has to be at the highest level.'

The yang to Dunabin's yin is another Dakar veteran, team principal Tiphanie Isnard. The official line is that this is a learning experience that will bring Dacia various technical benefits, and help boost the 'robust and outdoor' part of its brand DNA. But, asked if Dacia can do what nobody else has done, and win the Dakar at their first attempt, she doesn't hesitate: 'For sure, we want to make that change. It's not our expectation, but our hope.'

The best-laid plans can easily end upside-down at the foot of a dune on day two, one wheel hanging off and the engine on fire. But Dacia has done all it can to load the dice in its favour: team up with the hugely experienced Prodrive as technical provider; tap into wider Renault Group knowledge; and sign a stellar driver line-up, outshining even the personnel Audi hired for its ultimately successful three-Dakar programme.

Nasser Al-Attiyah, who won the 2024 World Rally Raid Championship with his Moroccan victory, has won five Dakars. Sébastien Loeb, nine-times World Rally champion, has been runner-up on the Dakar three times. And Cristina Gutiérrez Herrero – 20 years Al-Attiyah's junior – won the T3 category at Dakar last time out.

And they obsess over the details. The Nissan V6 engine, six-speed sequential manual gearbox, the tubular steel chassis and the rest of the hardware is well proven. The cabin – with a dashboard by Dacia's in-house designers – has been conceived to be safer and less unbearably hot. The bolts all have the same head size, to minimise the number of tools on the car for the running repairs that can be carried out by the driver and co-driver.

Dunabin says: 'It's not about power output – it's about engine management that lets you make the most of it, and reliability. An engine change incurs a 50-hour penalty, and would take 10-12 hours. So you really don't want to change an engine.'

As we watch the cars being checked and rebuilt in the gap between the Moroccan debut and the big challenge coming up in Saudi, Dunabin tells us: 'Post Morocco, the problems to be addressed were mostly reliability rather than performance. For instance, a cooling fan dropping off.' Cooling – for the powertrain and for the cabin – is a major obsession.

'There's a wind-tunnel session coming up in a couple of weeks – not to change the aerodynamics from a performance perspective, but to improve the cooling.'

The three cars are backed up by 62 staff and 25 support vehicles, laden with generators, inflatable service bays, washing machines and everything else you need for a fortnight living in the desert.

But Dacia isn't the only manufacturer-supported operation with high expectations for January's race. Mini is back. Ford has a new V8-engined Ranger Raptor. And many possible winners are in the consistently successful Toyota Hilux – including, intriguingly, a pair of two-time motorcycle category winners, Toby Price and Sam Sunderland.

NEW CARS

Familiar names, remixed

Jake Groves Deputy news editor

A Celica GT-Four, but it's not

▶ **Because it is, in fact,** a GR86 – albeit one with the mutated heart of a GR Corolla. Engineers within Toyota's North America division have hacked about with the front of a GR86's chassis to fit in the 300bhp three-cylinder turbo unit from the North American GR hot hatch, fitting all-wheel drive and a WRC-spec rollcage. The cherry on top? A Castrol-spec green, red and white livery complementing a row of rally headlights and a spoiler inspired by the mighty Celica GT-Four. It's just a one-off, designed to 'celebrate Toyota's past achievements and the possibility of WRC making a return to the United States.'

A Merc 190E, but even better

▶ **This isn't a restomod.** Yes, it may look like a Mercedes 190E 2.5-16 Evo II, but this isn't some period-correct restoration like getting fibre broadband in your Tudor house. It is more like a ground-up recreation – getting a modern apartment built to look like a Tudor house. HWA, a motorsport engineering firm with deep roots in DTM, is building a 100-unit run of the HWA Evo. Around 75 per cent of the car is new, from suspension components to the carbonfibre bodywork. A potent twin-turbo V6, tuned by HWA, is squeezed inside, and it has a manual gearbox.

A Maserati Biturbo, but rust-proof

▶ **Was this high up anyone's** restomod bingo card? Modena Automobili, a company specialising in creating Italian restomods, has decided to target the visually-challenged Shamal Biturbo from the '90s instead of a perhaps more aesthetically-pleasing Maserati. As well as inflated and exaggerated Biturbo design cues, the team have crowbarred in a Ghibli S V6 engine and an eight-speed ZF automatic transmission, targeting a five-second 0-62mph time and a 180mph top speed. We hear that it'll cost around £500k, which is weirdly not bad value in the inflated world of restomods.

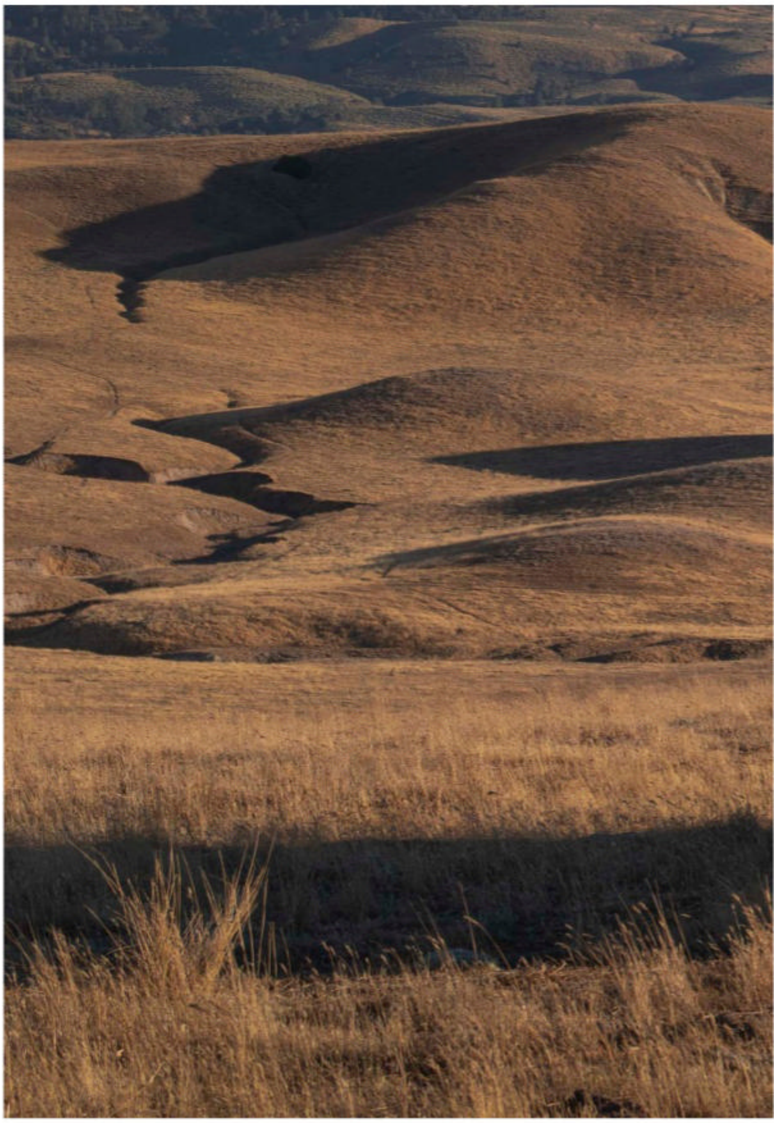
A Suzuki Vitara, but electric

▶ **Suzuki will not be rushed.** While other car makers have in some cases moved too quickly into making electric models, Suzuki has played the long game. The new e-Vitara is its first battery-electric production car, and it's all very Suzuki: sensible, reasonable and right-sized – it's barely any bigger than the combustion-engined equivalent. The battery is lithium iron phosphate, to keep costs down, with a respectable if unexciting level of power on offer and a choice of two- or four-wheel drive. All it needs is a bull bar on the options list and a convertible version and it'll be like the Vitara's good old days are back.

TRENDS

Repetizione! Is car design in a crisis?

Stephen Bayley Cultural commentator



Traveler SUV stays true to a template that was never about excitement

▶ **Saturn ate his own children.** The motor industry does the same, except it also regurgitates them. When Volkswagen took over truck maker Navistar (formerly International Harvester), it acquired the Scout badge.

Scout was a utility vehicle made by International Harvester between 1961 and 1980. The concept was 'replace the horse', specifically a slow carthorse rather than the fast racehorse which Henry Ford believed his customers yearned for.

Designer Ted Ornas created what was essentially a Jeep with softer, more friendly contours. Scout had understated, clean, modern lines and was – you could say – the first SUV. But it did not excite an ungovernable frenzy of consumer hysteria. Nor will VW's Scout EV duo, due on sale in North America in 2027 as Rivian rivals, both offered as pure EVs and range-extenders.

Car design is in a crisis. The rich vein of elegance that once informed the Italians has been all but exhausted. Today's BMWs look like the result of an anarchic game of consequences, not rational thought. Mercedes' product planning seems wholly randomised. With a few exceptions, French cars have lost their charm. And of American design, think Cybertruck. (And then *fuggedaboutit*.)

To explain, we need the Soviet economist, Nikolai Kondratiev. He had a theory that all economic – and indeed cultural – activity followed a sinusoidal pattern of peaks and troughs, often inspired by the discovery of new energy sources. The theory became known as Kondratiev waves. Alas for poor Nikolai, he was unable to predict his own falling-out with Stalin and was confined to a gulag, and later executed.

Electricity is that new energy source and dominates discussion of car design today. But this discussion began at precisely the time that we became fearful of the future.

This is why designers are plundering their memory palaces and Ford gives us re-issues of Bronco, Mustang and Capri, reinterpretations of the gutsy originals created to exploit consumer nostalgia in the absence of having anything to say for themselves.

Ditto electric the new Renault 5, Volkswagen ID. Buzz, you name it. This is what I mean by a trough.

The conversation about electricity as an intelligent power source is for another day, but there is no debate that electric cars are less interesting than combustion cars. A combustion engine has thousands of different parameters of noise, heat, vibration, smell. Electric has fewer. A big 12-cylinder demands a monumental Packard. A small air-cooled twin just has to be in something as cute as a Cinquecento or a 2CV.

The Scout EV is the latest car to plunder the past in a process begun by J Mays' 1991 Avus concept, which cleverly played with ghosts of Auto Unions. Mays (who also rebirthed the VW Beetle and the Ford Thunderbird) called this Retrofuturism, the title of an exhibition of his work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in LA in 2002.

The year before, BMW had re-imagined the Mini. At the time I was visiting Walter de Silva at Audi in Ingolstadt and – despairingly – he put his head in his hands and said '*Repetizione! Repetizione!*'

The Scout EVs are another repetition and the more depressing because it repeats an original that was – unlike, say, the Thunderbird or Mini – not that exciting in the first place. At least the first generation of hybrids, the ur-Prius and Honda Insight, were courageously odd, making explicit their whack-job outlier status. The all-electric GM EV1 was even odder, but now forgotten.

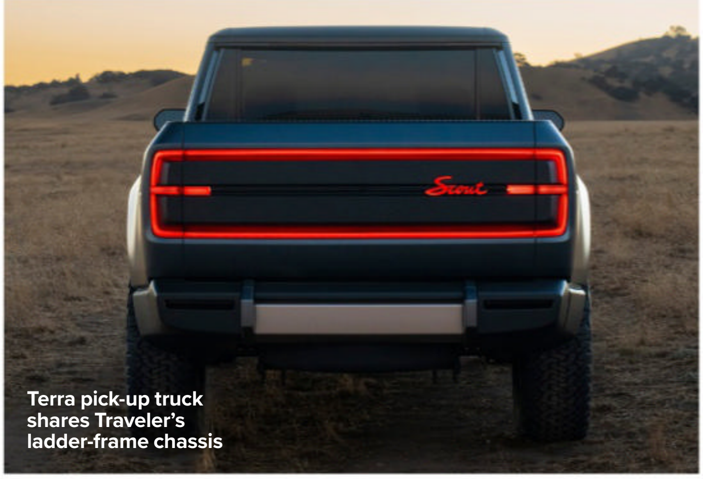
If electricity becomes the norm, then car design will be progressively infantilised. Actually, I see it as becoming no more interesting than Hot Wheels: with motive power and drive systems all similar, designers will gussy-up platforms with ever more playful parodies of the past.

Good food should taste of what it is. Good design should express truths about the product. Instead, I'd argue the Scout EVs are tofu made to taste like steak.

But back to those waves. Like Kondratiev, I might be wrong. There's a condition psychologists call apophenia, which means an inclination to see connections between unrelated things. Maybe I am apophenic. Perhaps electricity and retrophilia are unrelated. And perhaps looking back works for some. The buzz over the ID. Buzz was and remains real (particularly in North America), with early cars changing hands for over list price. And Renault's 5 is proving popular, with 50,000 expressions of interest in Europe in the first two weeks; 12,000 in the UK.

But, if Kondratiev was right, perhaps when hydrogen arrives car design will soon be out of its trough and back to its peak. Meanwhile, I'll tell you one thing of which I am certain: no one, not even the most ardent retromaniac, will be reviving the Scout Terra and Traveler.

The Scout EVs are the latest cars to plunder the past; tofu made to taste like steak



Terra pick-up truck shares Traveler's ladder-frame chassis

First drives

THE WORLD'S BEST WRITERS IN THE NEW CARS THAT MATTER

ALPINE
GZ·965·SP
92

The 300-mile test

NEW CAR MEETS REAL WORLD

ALPINE A290

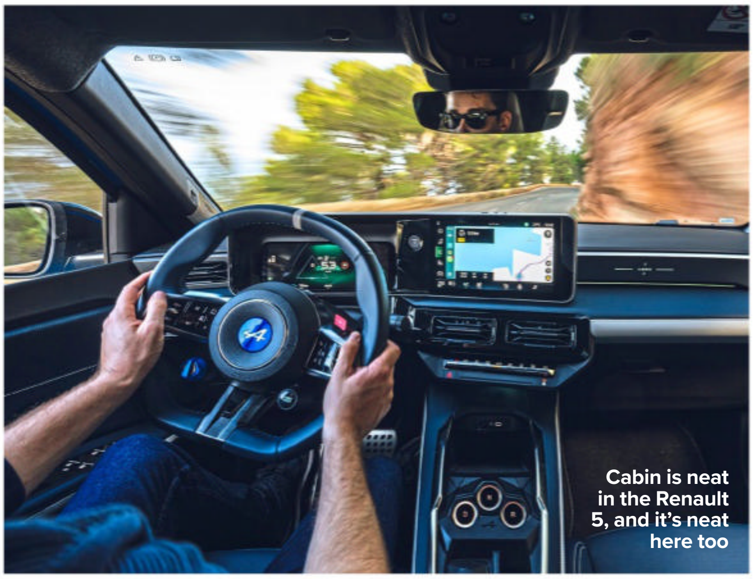
Heat seeker

Alpine's sportier version of the Renault 5 is that very rare thing: an EV that could actually benefit from more power

Words James Dennison **Photography** Jordan Butters

Extra beef, not just the badges, says Alpine

Handling rewards a committed driver


Cabin is neat in the Renault 5, and it's neat here too

Arrow straight and as smooth as syrup, the sun-drenched strand of tarmac ahead is both a suggestion and a justification all in one. For a performance EV like the Alpine A290, this is its chance to shine, to blow its occupants away with a silent burst of forward motion so instant and ferocious that it defines the entire experience.

But maybe, just maybe, this time it will be different. The A290 is, by the warped standards of your average EV, rather slow. With a 0-62mph time of 6.4 seconds, it's barely any quicker than a Ford Fiesta ST and as such you sure as hell won't see it 'slaying' any mapped Audi RS6s in internet drag-race videos.

Whisper it, but perhaps this is the sporty EV that shuns the easy win of awe-inspiring longitudinal *g* and instead chooses to do things the hard way and produce a driving experience that focuses on horizontally-induced smiles.

But right now, we're a long way from that. We've picked up this top-spec GTS car (expected price of around £38k) from Mallorca's main airport. It's November, which we'd assumed would be out of season for Mallorca's tourist trade, which had led us to expect it be half-deserted. But not a bit of it.

The island is roughly the same size as Essex, but Palma de Mallorca Airport is the 15th busiest in Europe and today it feels like at least half of the annual influx of holidaymakers have descended on the surrounding area.

No matter. It doesn't take long to break free from the aviation battery farm and onto one of the three main motorways that run like asphalt arteries through the body of the island.

Unashamedly retro in its inspiration, the A290 makes a striking silhouette amid the humdrum workhorses that form the majority of Mallorca's traffic. Based on the Renault 5 but given the run of Alpine's performance parts catalogue, it just about treads the fine line between tasteful details and Halfords end-of-year sale.

The large sills and swollen arches are a clear indication that the A290 has a 60mm wider track than the R5, while X patterns in the front lamps are supposed to mimic the tape on historic rally cars. The bonnet-mounted air dam is perhaps a step too far – it looks like the type of Perspex box an arachnophile might keep their pet tarantula in – but otherwise it's a clean sweep of well-integrated details.

Mind you, as I swerve an impatient local helming his battered Renault Kangoo perilously close to my rear end, I feel the unmistakable trickle of ice-cold Coca Cola permeate my shoes and immediately curse Alpine's designers for a detail they failed to consider. In an effort to draw links to the brilliant A110, the three gear-selector buttons have been carried over to the A290… at the expense of cupholders. Standard in a Lamborghini Revuelto, but too mainstream for a five-door hatch. Make it make sense.

It is a mere blip, however, in what is otherwise an everyday driving experience that's largely as polite and well-mannered as that offered by the Renault 5. Whether it's cruising east on Ma-19 at 75mph or threading through the narrow streets of the scattered towns and hamlets, the A290 is quiet, refined and – bar the firm ride at low speeds – reasonably pliant.

Overhead, dazzling light from the clear, bright sky burns off the morning mist as we trundle through the hillside hamlet of Randa in search of roads that will let us test Alpine's claims of exhilaration behind the wheel. There's the odd craned neck from pedestrians, a pointed drawing-alongside from another driver to investigate further, but otherwise the A290 slips along in near silence. Cars this aggressively styled don't usually sound so quiet.

Indeed for the first 40 minutes, I'm concerned that perhaps Alpine hasn't done enough to turn things up from the Renault 5, such is its civility. However, switch the drive mode into its sportiest setting – you have four in total – and there's clear fun to be had. We've peeled off the Ma-13 motorway just north of Inca, Mallorca's third largest town and known as the leather-making capital of the island.

Still distracted following this morning's cupholder ▶

Pick-up: 0 miles

Crosses on the front lamps mean you can spot the A290 a mile off in the dim morning light. They look the part – but might be a bit much for some.

4 miles

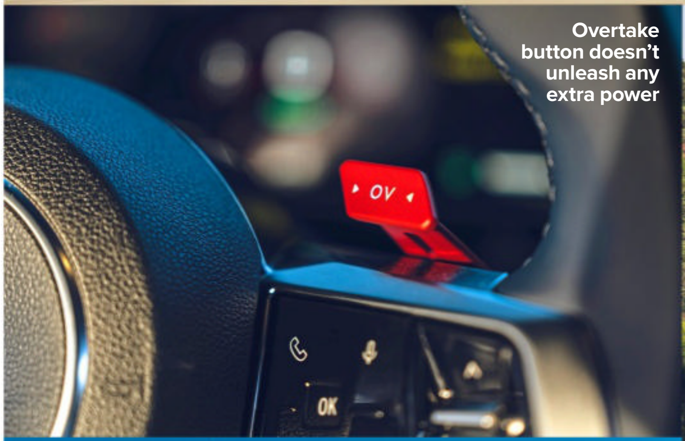
Joy of joys, the method of turning off the over-zealous lane-keeping driver assistance tech is wonderfully easy; driver gets to pick and choose.

23 miles

Randa. Like a smaller, quieter Ronda. Its has a sacred mountain and a sanctuary frequented by philosopher Ramon Llull.

ALPINE
GZ-962-SP

Chassis' excellence comes to the fore on track. But so does the weight

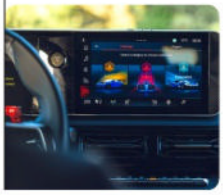


Overtake button doesn't unleash any extra power

ALPINE
A290 GTS

On test, range was about 180 miles; official figure is 226

45 miles



Alpine Telemetrics gives you challenges in exchange for bronze, silver or gold medals. Tasks include achieving G-force targets. Harmless fun?

53 miles

Top-spec 217bhp GTS doles out overtakes on demand; 178bhp version is likely to be less popular given the meagre price difference.

84 miles

No cupholders anywhere in the A290, so Coke can sits in the door pocket. There's absolutely no way this could possibly go wrong.

You can carry huge speed into a corner and trim the line with a touch of throttle modulation

disaster (and mulling the possibility of a new pair of locally-made brogues), I tip the A290 into an empty roundabout with a touch too much commitment. It really doesn't take much to get things going on the rear end, the back of the car arcing around gracefully as I add a dab of power and stylishly exit with only a moment of hesitation induced by the traction control – yes, it did that with TC on.

It has all the rotation you could realistically want on the road and it feels like Alpine has been clever with the weight management of the car. Split 57-43 front-rear, there's a noticeable amount of longitudinal pitch, and it's that clear shift of weight that seems to make the car feel keener to rotate than you'd expect. Granted, having the front lift while under power out of a corner isn't optimal, but there's enough mechanical grip – aided by brake-biased torque vectoring – to keep the line tight, providing you're patient.

A good omen for things to come, then, but I'm not dishing out any five-star ratings based on the evidence of one corner. I point the A290 north-east towards the Cap de Formentor. Nestled at the tip of the island and the Serra de Tramuntana mountain range, the road leading up to it is restricted during summer months but the off season grants complete access to the pearls within.

A single strand of tarmac rests lazily on the landscape and takes you on a rollercoaster through the golden greens of vibrant woodland, opening up to pale rock formations jutting out from the teal blue sea like dwellings of prehistoric leviathans. Up ahead, there are more switchbacks than the Monte Carlo rally that was once dominated by the A290's ancestors – a fearsome test for the heaviest car in Alpine's existence.

Neither of the two simulated powertrain sounds on offer is doing it for me, so instead I'm imagining a co-driver's instructions as I approach a super-technical section of corners. 'Left 3 tightens over crest, don't cut. Caution.' Of course it's a million miles from the raw rally-car experience, but there's fun to be had here.

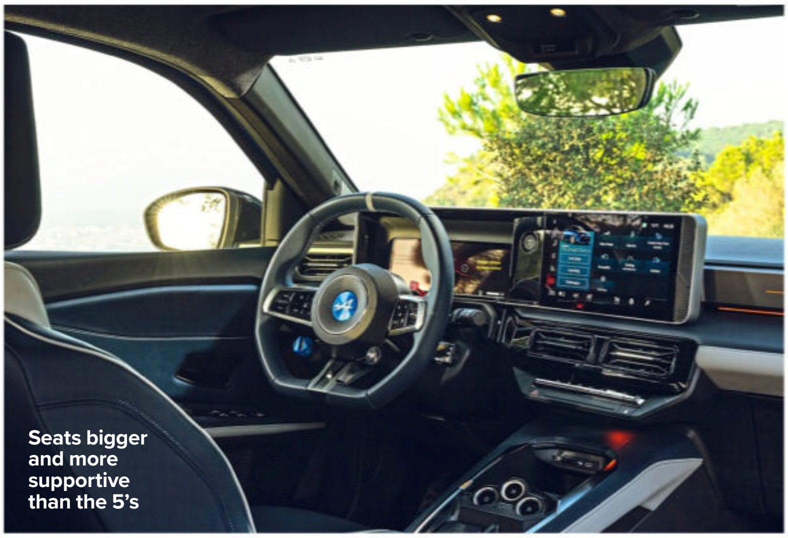
Onto the anchors into the first hairpin, the brake pedal delivers appreciable feel and solidity and shows no sign of fade even after a repeated onslaught. Meanwhile, the steering – while it could be heavier – has a positive feel just off centre and majors on confidence-inspiring turn-in. Despite the car's boxy shape, I'm also sitting nice and low with decent visibility as I swivel my head to seek out the next apex, front end digging in strongly as the brakes pinch inside wheels to get me around neatly. Torque steer rears its head, but it's easy to control and feels endearingly old-school.

Pushing further towards the blue wall of ocean, the A290 reveals more of its cornering ability while still cleverly hiding its weight within the sorted chassis. New anti-roll bars and hydraulic bump stops team with a multi-link rear end to deliver far more sophistication than is normal with a car this size to the point where I'm convinced that extra power is on the cards for a more focused future version.

And despite my initial complaints about EVs with unnecessary amounts of power, I'm wondering if the A290 has perhaps taken it too far the other way. The handling is unmistakably hot hatch, yet here there's none of the satisfaction you can get from working a small but eager powertrain. Everything in a straight line is too easy, too sterile, a mere interval between bends.

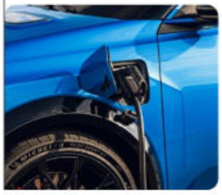
The overtake button – while it looks exciting – fails to add anything either. Confusingly, it does not unlock extra power but instead engages a super-aggressive throttle map that delivers full beans even if the pedal is only partially depressed. And, of course, you can just get the exact same effect by pushing the pedal flat to the floor…

Speaking of which, we need to get a move on. The dazzling spotlight in the sky has taken a tumble and dusk is fast approaching as I point the A290 due south back towards Palma. As a means of getting from A to B quickly and efficiently, the little Alpine is brilliantly effective. Instant power, big-car cruising manners and impressive agility when required. ▶



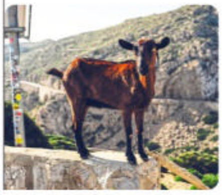
Seats bigger and more supportive than the 5's

85 miles



A 15-80 per cent charge in the A290 takes around 30 minutes from a 100kW charger – the time it takes to dry out Coke-drenched shoes.

121 miles



One of the first animals that humans brought to Mallorca around 2500 years ago was the wild goat. Small, powerful, but surprisingly heavy.

147 miles

Quick stop off at Circuit Mallorca Llucmajor (tricky to type, trickier to pronounce) and the A290 holds up well to numerous vigorous laps.

The Alpine acquits itself well on motorways, winding roads and even the racetrack

Handy, then, that not 10 minutes from the airport is the Circuit Mallorca Llucmajor – a sort of glorified karting track packed with tight, technical sections that could unsettle even the most sorted sports car. So where does the A290 sit on that scale?

What stands out most is the adjustability. As demonstrated earlier by the greasy roundabout, this car loves a bit of lift-off oversteer – more so with ESC and TC now off. This means you can carry huge speed into what would traditionally be a third-gear corner and trim the line with a touch of throttle modulation, getting the nose pointed exactly where you want it. The onboard Alpine Telemetrics system even gives you tips on how to achieve optimum oversteer – among other things – in the coaching section. Nice touch.

Dive into the slower stuff and there's a greater need to manage the weight, plus the brake-biased torque vectoring suddenly feels a little out of its depth (a proper differential would be an intriguing addition). Notably, after several spirited laps, the brakes and the Michelin Pilot Sport S5 tyres were holding up well and showing little sign of throwing in the towel.

With track time ticked off and the A290 needing a charge, we make the short hop north-west into the island's capital. Picking our way through the chaotic city streets, the sparkly Vision Blue paint of the A290 is now rendered deep, inky and brooding in the shadows of claustrophobic alleyways.

Despite acquitting itself well across motorways, winding roads and even the racetrack, the Alpine feels at home here – its tight turning circle and quickfire torque allowing brisk progress across the urban jungle. And yet, although I'm largely impressed, I'm struggling to shake the feeling that while the A290 has moved the EV performance car game forwards, it hasn't progressed the small performance car overall.

Alpine should be commended for shunning huge power and headline figures, in keeping with the spirit of a genre of car that's always revelled in powertrains low on output but high on fun. However, there's no escaping the knowledge that this uses electric propulsion, the soulless, mathematical nature of which feels out of place in a car that otherwise feels like a proper hot hatch.

We seem to have come full circle. What the A290 can do in the corners is enjoyable and deeply encouraging. But without either the character provided by a good combustion engine or the shock and awe of inflated EV power, it's missing something.

Data

PRICE
£38,000 (est)

POWERTRAIN
52kWh battery, single e-motor, front-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE
217bhp, 221lb ft, 6.4sec 0-62mph, 106mph

WEIGHT
1479kg

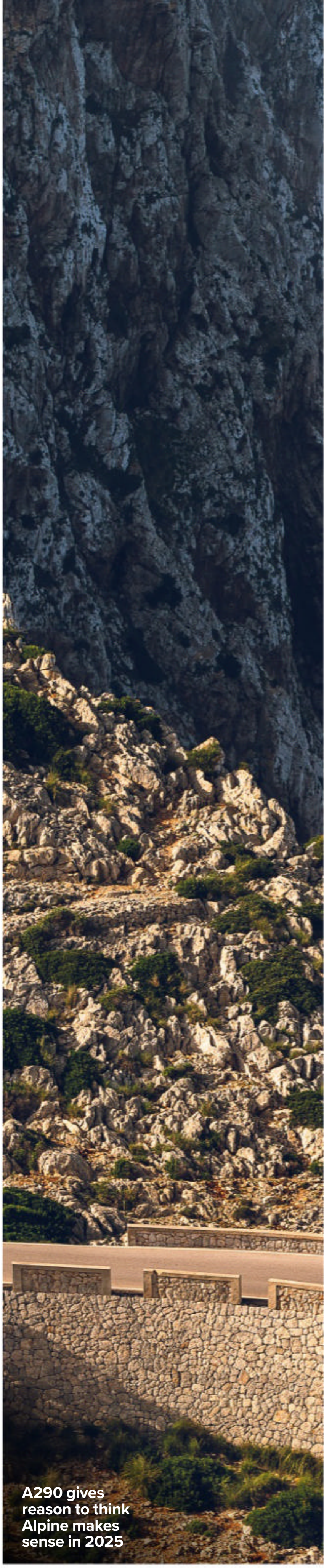
EFFICIENCY
4.35 miles per kWh, range 226 miles, 0g/km CO2

ON SALE
Early 2025

RATING
★★★★☆

Next month

AUDI A6 E-TRON: WHAT AUDI DOES BEST, BUT NOW ELECTRIC



A290 gives reason to think Alpine makes sense in 2025

WATCH THE VIDEO!

GET *CAR*'S DIGITAL EDITION – SEE PAGE 60

It's a great engine to interact with. It's muscular low down, but happiest being hammered to the red line

911 nerds love how hard it is to tell it's a 992.2

PORSCHE 911 CARRERA 2

Basic, in a good way

The sub-£100k entry 911 remains a fantastic experience

Although the hybrid 911 is now with us in the shape of the Carrera GTS, those who prefer unelectrified power still have plenty of choice. Porsche has already revealed the turbocharged Carrera T and boostless GT3, and now the Carrera 2 has arrived.

Our test car is as subtle as a 911 gets, but even so it's not completely standard. Its metallic silver paint is an option that busts this Carrera 2 past the £100k mark. Hell, going for the £206 Porsche crest on the front headrests will do that.

The engine has an extra 9bhp and the same torque as before, albeit at 50rpm earlier. However, there are new turbochargers taken from the old GTS and a charge cooler from the Turbo. It's the same basic engine as the Carrera T, with an eight-speed dual-clutch transmission instead of a six-speed manual, giving sub-4.0sec 0-62mph times if you've bought the Sport Chrono pack.

That pack brings very effective launch control. It hooks up staggeringly well from a standstill on cold tarmac even if the clutch is dumped at a highly optimistic rpm. I drove an 800bhp AMG SL earlier the same day, but even so the 911 doesn't feel remotely slow or like you really need any more poke.

It's a great engine to interact with. There's plenty of muscularity low down, yet it's an engine that feels at its happiest being hammered to the red line, delivering a delightful flat-six howl. Manual control of the PDK 'box is a button press away.

Larger brakes and new adaptive dampers help further the Carrera 2's abilities in the bends without diluting that 911 feel. They give tight body control and flat cornering. The rear weight bias gives fantastic traction out of tight bends and an occasional sense of lightness over the front axle. Talkative steering lets you know what's going on up front, helping you use the balance to your advantage; oversteer is still most definitely an entertaining option. It's still very much a sports car.

DCT is revised; no manual on the Carrera 2

All 911s are now two-seaters as standard with rear seats a no-cost option. You get adaptive LED headlights, lane-keep assist, traffic sign recognition, brake assist, parking sensors, a rear-view camera, and heated front seats and steering wheel.

Starting is now by button, and the analogue central revcounter has met the bin. In its place is a 12.6-inch curved display with a variety of layouts available. The graphics are sharp, and information presented clearly, while purists will appreciate the option of a virtual central revcounter redlined at 12 o'clock. The fact that the new digital display is a very good one means that losing the old revcounter doesn't feel like a setback.

The steering wheel is mercifully free of touchpads, the spokes retaining proper buttons and scroll wheels. Also welcome is the adoption as standard of the dial showing drive modes that was previously reserved for the Sport Chrono pack.

The switch from 992 to 992.2 is a subtle evolution for the Carrera 2, and there's certainly very little to get upset about, and a lot to enjoy – albeit pretty much the same things there were to enjoy on the 992.

ALAN TAYLOR-JONES

First verdict

Arguably all the 911 you ever need. Improved standard kit welcome, but you'll still want to hit the options hard

★★★★★

THE FIRST HOUR

1 minute
A silver exterior with a red interior and silver wheels suits the 992.2 well

3 minutes
I don't miss the weird old fake key to start it, or the analogue revcounter

12 minutes
Opening the flaps in the sports exhaust convinces me it's a worthwhile option

27 minutes
Launch control feels like it's delivering the numbers. Traction is as good as you'd hope

59 minutes
A little more compliance in the suspension would be welcome

PLUS

Plenty quick enough; still drives like a 911; much improved standard kit

MINUS

PDK only; hard to imagine anyone will actually get one for less than £100k

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
From £99,800	2981cc twin-turbo flat-six, eight-speed dual-clutch auto, rear-wheel drive	389bhp @ 6500rpm, 332lb ft @ 2000rpm, 3.9sec 0-62mph, 183mph	1520kg	26.4-28mpg, 244-230g/km CO2	Now

BYD SEALION 7

Nautical but nice

And then there were four: BYD's UK range gets a family crossover

We've been moving for a matter of a few seconds before we learn our first big lesson about the BYD Sealion 7: the brakes are very powerful but also very sudden. Someone steps out in front of us and I have to go straight into an emergency stop. Nobody dies, so that's good, but the suddenness of the brake action will prove to be a recurring theme of our time in the Sealion 7.

It's a new addition to this Chinese manufacturer's European line-up, a crossover available in Excellence, Comfort and Design trim, with a choice of 91.3kWh or 82.5kWh battery. BYD UK has yet to confirm exact pricing, but figure on £55,000 for this top-spec version with nappa leather, a head-up display and a 4.5sec 0-62mph time and you're in the ballpark, with the Comfort about £10k less and the Design AWD sitting in the middle.

It's nice enough inside, BYD's designers having done a decent job of creating a comfortable, usable environment, with its rotatable 15.6-inch touchscreen dominating the centre console. That is complemented by a 10.25-inch instrument panel, which could use a bigger speedometer read-out please – something certain to be even more useful in the lesser Sealion 7s that do without the head-up-display of this Excellence AWD.

Mercifully, there are some buttons, stalks, and a gear selector, so despite the tech-rich, screen-dancing antics that are possible, it actually feels relatively conventional. Indeed, you could pretty much ignore that big screen, although you need to visit it if you want to switch off the emergency lane-keeping assist and lane-centring control systems, which soon get annoying if left on.

It's swift, as you'd expect with 523bhp, comfortable too, and even deep into motorway speeds it's cutting through the air without troubling your ears. The seats provide decent support, and heat and ventilation (on all trim levels) up front, and there's plenty of room in the three rear seats, all heated. There's a 520-litre boot, making this a perfectly capable family proposition.

Resemblance to aquatic mammals: minimal

The steering feels pretty numb, but it turns accurately enough, with a bit of body lean if you're pushing hard, but otherwise the suspension does a fairly respectable job of keeping it in check, making use of frequency-sensitive dampers.

Exciting and engaging it isn't, but that's not really a criticism – this is meant to be fuss-free family transport. What is worth complaining about, though, is the lack of polish in some areas. It's a car that would have benefitted from a bit more time being spent on its calibration before it went into production. Those grabby brakes, the somewhat inert steering and the over-active assistance features all demonstrate that.

It's also a shame that to get the fastest 230kW DC 24-minute 10-80 per cent charging potential you need the Excellence AWD, the other pair making do with 150kW, which means 32 minutes for a 10-80 per cent charge. That and we couldn't get the standard-fit Apple CarPlay to connect. Those beefs aside, the Sealion 7's a decent effort, if not top of the class.

KYLE FORTUNE

First verdict

Roomy, comfy and well equipped, but thoroughly lacking in personality or driver appeal

★★★☆☆

THE FIRST HOUR

1 minute
Jeez, the brakes are sharp, as we decelerate from about 3mph to standstill with the merest brush of the pedal

2 minutes
Indicate, *bing bong* – and you spend the rest of the day with *Personal Jesus* by Depeche Mode as your personal earworm

15 minutes
Ooh, let's rotate the screen. We're now navigating on portrait

16 minutes
Nah, it was better landscape

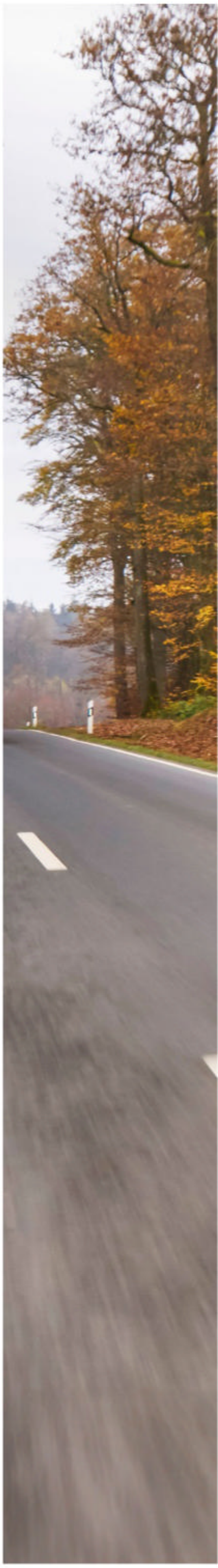
45 minutes
It's quiet on the motorway, and this top-spec model has a useful range

PLUS

Spacious; okay range; comfortable and well equipped

MINUS

Pretty numb; need the most expensive model for the fastest charging



Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	£55,000 (est, Excellence AWD)	91.3kWh battery, two e-motors, all-wheel drive	523bhp, 509lb ft, 4.5sec 0-62mph, 133mph	2435kg	3.4 miles per kWh, 311 miles range (both est), 0g/km CO2	Early 2025

Exciting and engaging it isn't, but it's good as fuss-free family transport

Five-seater's boot is plenty big enough for everyone's bags

It makes 771bhp – the most Bentley has ever placed in a saloon, besting the 626bhp W12

Other colours are available. Still, why hold back?

BENTLEY FLYING SPUR

Altitude slickness

New Flying Spur is better than ever, with clever powertrain and chassis tech enhancing both luxury and performance

Appearances can be deceptive. There is little on the outside of this fourth-generation Flying Spur to suggest the extent of the alterations beneath the surface. Just a few subtle amendments to the grille and the lines of the lower bumpers. Different wheels. And this Speed version has dark-tint brightwork that contrasts with the more traditionally shiny elements of the alternative Mulliner specification. Sit in the back if you want, and you'll find it suitably cosseting, but this Flying Spur lives to be driven.

As with the Continental GT, the Flying Spur now packs the all-new 4.0-litre twin-turbo V8. Co-developed with Porsche and built in Zuffenhausen, it might seem strangely retrograde, since it uses only single-scroll turbos and ditches active cylinder deactivation. But no. Its own 591bhp is complemented by a 188bhp electric motor, tucked into the eight-speed dual-clutch gearbox and fed by a 25.9kWh battery.

This not only delivers 771bhp – the most Bentley has ever placed in a saloon, besting the 626bhp W12 – it also over-compensates in other areas. Why deactivate just half the cylinders when you can now turn the engine off entirely? Why bother with complex turbos when the e-motor produces 332lb ft, enabling enough torque fill to eliminate lag? It also helps the engine run leaner, and achieves a system peak of 738lb ft.

Then there's the WLTP-rated 47 miles of electric-only driving capability, knocking the official CO2 figure down to a ludicrous 33g/km and extending the theoretical overall driving range to 515 miles. We saw 24-42mpg depending on the circumstances, which is remarkable for nearly 2.7 tonnes of high-performance petrol. You can now charge the battery while driving, as well as via a socket, adding to the versatility.

Since cramming that lot all in meant tearing up the electrical architecture, there's also an upgrade to the sensor suite and infotainment, plus significant revisions to the chassis. The fundamental tech carries ▶

THE FIRST HOUR

10 minutes
New ability to charge on the move means Flying Spur can run silent when you get home late

22 minutes
It may weigh 2646kg, but it can make very short work of mountain gradients (and driving licences)

37 minutes
Electric drive is available up to 87mph. Nice

44 minutes
Air-quality monitor uses GPS to assess when it might need to close the vents, such as in a tunnel

60 minutes
Seems odd the first time the seat adjusts itself for your 'wellness', but it results in much reduced aches and pains

PLUS
Sensational performance and poise; artfully crafted cabin; meaningful electric range

MINUS
Easy to add a lot to the price; even more advanced chassis tech found elsewhere

Suspension copes superbly with all that weight and power

A lot of buttons, but cabin has space to spare

Limo? Sports car? Actually quite a bit of both

> **Distances pass quickly, and with character. The intricately crafted comfort of the interior makes travelling a rare joy**

over: active all-wheel drive, all-wheel steering, rear eLSD, torque vectoring and Bentley Dynamic Ride, the firm's 48-volt active anti-roll-bar set-up. As well as recalibrating these, Bentley has switched to twin-chamber air springs with 'advanced' dual-valve dampers that allow fully independent adjustment of compression and rebound.

The new spring and damper combo not only means improved ride quality in Comfort while maintaining body control in Sport, it also enables variation in the understeer parameters depending on the driving mode. This works in tandem with the all-wheel drive, making Sport more rear-biased than before. The updates don't go as far as the latest Porsche and Audi revisions that include pitch- and roll-controlling active ride, but the Spur can still torque the anti-roll to resist body movement or entirely decouple opposing wheels as required.

Right here, right now, plug-in hybrids are the best. Gliding silently through populated areas promotes a serenity you can then shatter as the mood takes you by deploying the full enchilada when the houses peter out and the road begins to climb and sway. Response is ferociously electric, this 5.3-metre-long limo feeling every bit as fast as the 3.5sec 0-62mph time would suggest. Yet it's far from fully thuggish; in Comfort the noise remains muted, in Sport it's allowed to become more raucous and distinct but never entirely uncouth. You can pick off the pick-up trucks at will, regardless of the turns and the gradients, the alcantara edging to the steering wheel adding to the tactility of a driving experience that belies the 200kg this generation has gained.

Comfort mode takes the sting out of the wriggling lines of crack-sealing tar that liberally ripple over sun-bleached asphalt, the optional 'wellness' seating for four occupants providing constant micro support and climate adjustment, tweaking the padding beneath you to reduce fatigue.

The cornering ability hardly wilts in Comfort, either, with body movement remaining natural – in contrast to those counter-leaning Porsches and Audis. But if you need to press on, the more tightly controlled and weightier Sport mode certainly delivers on its promise by allowing you to carry speed through direction changes more confidently, at the cost of greater annoyance from those surface imperfections.

Between the two sits the exquisitely judged 'Bentley' mode, which moderates some of the patter without giving up all of the control. It's an excellent default, though you can set custom parameters if you prefer. Not everyone will enjoy the dancing brake pedal, which flickers beneath your foot whenever the electric motor's regen capability kicks in to slow the car. But the gearbox is quick-shifting and the drivetrain generally smooth and decisive.

Distances pass quickly, and with character. The intricately crafted comfort of the interior makes travelling a rare joy. The updated infotainment integrates some popular applications – such as Spotify – natively, so you don't even need to connect your phone to use them, while conversely allowing access to key car functions without the need to fully exit Apple CarPlay.

Concerns are few. The centre console is a button fest. But it's increasingly such a novelty to have dedicated climate and other physical switches that this near-clutter is a small price to pay. For such a big car, the passenger compartment seems a tad cosy, but it's not cramped; the boot is an absurdly tiny 346 litres, though. There's wind noise at speed, but road noise is well suppressed.

It's hard to think of anything else that delivers quite the Flying Spur experience. You could buy an AMG S-Class, or a faster full-EV. There are even cleverer chassis technologies available elsewhere in the VW Group. But the Flying Spur has character, competence, comfort and composure, not to mention a mighty newfound thump to its performance, that should bring many happy and uncomplicated miles of long-distance luxury in combination with a usable amount of zero emissions. Amen.

CJ HUBBARD

First verdict

Better in just about every way than the very good predecessor. Just be careful when you venture into the options list

★★★★☆

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
£266,500	25.9kWh battery, 3996cc twin-turbo V8, eight-speed DCT, all-wheel drive	771bhp @ 6000rpm, 738lb ft @ 2000rpm, 3.5sec 0-62mph, 177mph	2646kg	202mpg, 47-mile electric range, 33g/km CO2	Now

Opinion

EXPLORER vs EXPLORER + BUSINESS USERS + SUVs PLEASE

The race series with everything… except an audience

Letter of the month

Rallying cry

You're quite right to be baffled by the lack of public interest in World Rally (November 2024 issue), which seems to be increasingly overshadowed by F1. Personally, I can't imagine that the much-discussed *Drive to Survive* effect is universally positive for F1. So many of the people who come into focus on the Netflix programme seem quite whingey and entitled, which I find very unappealing. Whereas the characters in WRC tend to be much more no-nonsense. It's a bit like when multiple World Superbike champion Carl Fogarty turned up on *I'm a Celebrity…* and just coped with all the challenges, making everyone else look very lightweight. The WRC drivers are from that mould, whereas some of the F1 guys seem to be a bit pro footballer.

Glen Pardon

Sounds like a job for Zoom

How I laughed with despair when I read your first review of the BMW i5 eDrive M40 in your November issue: a starting price of £78k, £95k on the road with options, only able to drive 230 miles, in reality maybe 190 miles.

For the past 13 years I have leased a succession of BMW 5-series diesels – because of the balance between performance, practicality, usability, style, handling and range. My current 520d Touring easily gets 750 miles from a tank, and for a business user that is paramount. I don't have the time – and cannot charge my customers extra for – an extra two or three hours each day hanging around while a car is charging, at a cost on public chargers that is often the equivalent to about 16mpg in a petrol or diesel car, and then cover only about 200 miles before having to do it all again.

To me your new long-term test car seems like a toy, not a serious car.

Dave Taylor

Vigna shows not all car CEOs are raving egomaniacs

Ford's folly

Regarding Simon Preston's letter (October 2024) about the new European Ford Explorer, I've just spent four weeks on holiday driving in Canada and hired two vehicles, one of which was the US Explorer. With a 2.3-litre V6, it's smooth and very comfortable. It's Discovery sized, so took me and three friends and all of our luggage very comfortably over 1700 miles. Maybe not that dynamic but it has adequate power and fulfilled every other requirement perfectly while achieving 32mpg. I want to change my Audi Q5 for something bigger and would buy one like a shot but it's not sold in the UK.

If you have a busy working schedule driving 35,000 miles per year, like I used to have, an electric car is worthless. I'd never have got my work done, wasting half my working day trying to get the thing charged up. Similarly my son and his co-director have used Volvo XC90 hybrids over the last five years. Great cars for them and their families. They'll be looking to change those next year – but, lo and behold, it looks like Volvo is still going all electric. They'll probably buy BMW X5 hybrids instead.

Phil Leonard

Low-key hot Fords

I've followed with interest the recent discussion about performance Fords. In 1968, I traded in a red Triumph TR4A for a Mk2 Lotus Cortina, or Twin Cam as Ford then called it. It did not have a side stripe and the only way you could tell it was the Lotus model was from its lower stance and wider wheels. The TR4A was the opposite – its looks said 'sports car' but the reality was the total opposite.

The TR4A cornered like a rowing boat and its lumbering, low-revving engine was anything but sporty. Its forte was relaxed high-speed cruising in a straight line. The Cortina, by comparison, was an incredibly agile car. The twin-cam engine's responsiveness made it a joy to drive.

Not many Mk2 Lotus Cortinas were actually produced and Ford focused the twin-cam engine in the Escort, which became a rally icon in the '70s. I have been a sporting saloon car freak ever since.

That said, my strongest memory of *CAR* in the late '60s was a road test between a Marcos (with a wooden frame and an 1800 Volvo engine) and a TVR Griffith (with a 4.2-litre Ford V8 engine). Different days!

Richard Davies

Not hot hatches

The fight we were all looking forward to seeing: Honda Civic Type R vs Toyota GR Yaris (Giant Test, October 2024), and Ben Miller did a great job, although I would argue that these aren't really hot hatches in the traditional sense. Just putting the prices aside for one moment, the Civic has swollen to Mondeo-type proportions, and rally-bred full-time 4x4s didn't used to be allowed into hot hatch tests, although lately there's been an 'alright then' acceptance, initially with the likes of the VW Golf R. But £50k for a Civic!

I'd be more inclined to go for some of the cars you have recommended in

the past as secondhand buys, like a £20k BMW 330d Touring and a £15k Fiesta ST. Then it's trackdays, tyres and a few trips to the Caribbean with the change.
Nick Moffett

The Civic Type R's journey from £34k to £50k is interesting. Emissions regs and a shrinking customer base pushed Honda towards tiny volumes, which in turn prompted it to make the car even more special/expensive. BM

Like a boss

Ferrari's new-ish boss talks a lot of sense, judging from your highly illuminating interview in the November issue. Benedetto Vigna seems to have just enough romance in his soul to understand the magic of the brand, but not so much that he's unrealistic about changes that need to be made.

And a decent human being! The bit about saying 'thank you' to Giampaolo Dallara – lovely detail.

Not as high-profile as some previous occupants of the hot seat, but clearly very focused on a future that's both commercially successful and constantly innovative. If only every boss was so switched on.
Lisa Wilde

Bring on the SUV

At the risk of causing some *CAR* contributors and fellow readers to blow a gasket, could I respectfully suggest that rather than put so much effort into the W1 (November cover story), McLaren should have put aside its reservations and made an SUV?

The problem is that when it eventually does bow to the inevitable and build a big 4x4 – like Ferrari, Lambo, Maserati and Porsche – the timing will probably mean it has to be pure electric. And it will be somewhere between tricky and impossible for McLaren to make it as light and agile as a McLaren should be, simply because it's laden down with batteries.

Lotus walked straight into that same trap. If Lotus had used its ingenuity and lightweighting expertise on a combustion 4x4, it could have had a winner on its hands.
Ian Archer

Come on, McLaren – where does the dog go?

Have your say:

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Should know better

I read the interview with AMG head Michael Schiebe (Inquisition, October) and I was struck by how little he knew of his own customers. Regarding the failure of the C63, he blames it on 'not explaining the technology enough'. No, it's because you made an over-engineered, heavy, expensive car with a four-cylinder engine. That is why no one bought it.

There is more to driving than 0-62mph times. AMG buyers want a visceral experience, not a super-complicated soulless computer. The disconnect is startling for someone who should know better.
Mark Molinaro

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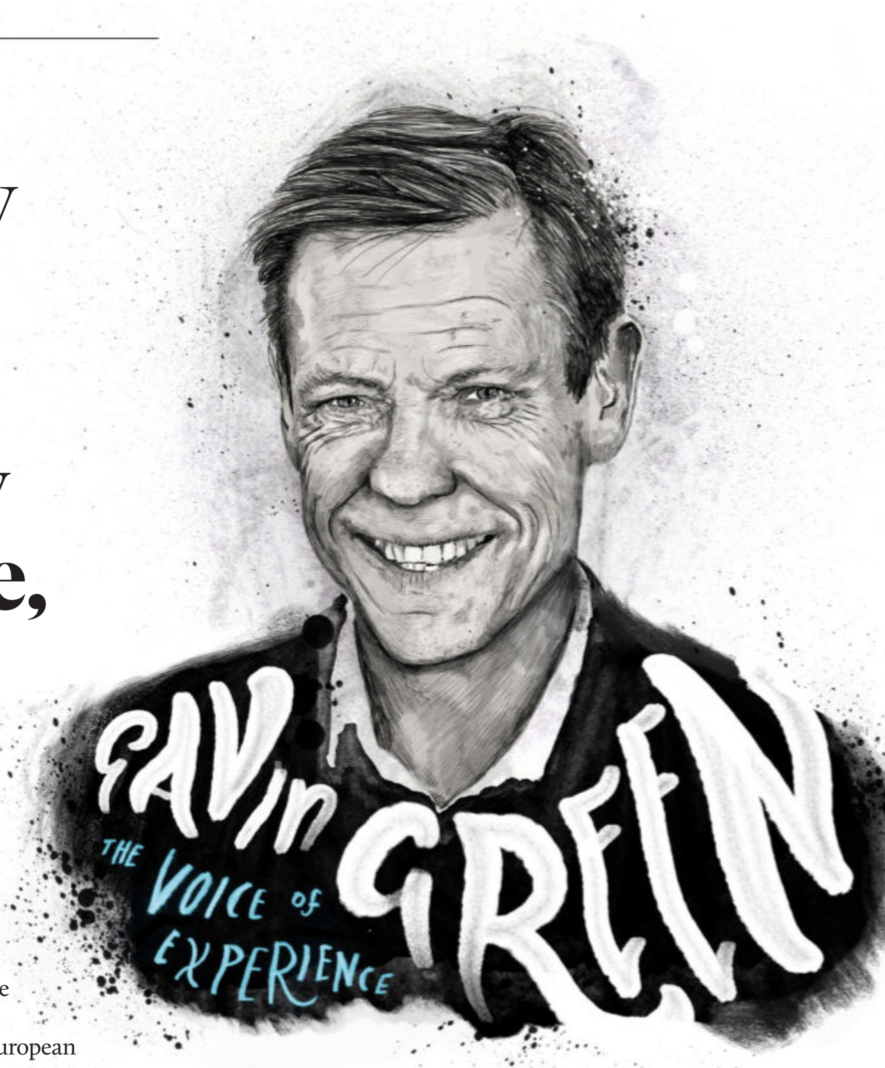
‘How many European EV car-maker start-ups are there? Of any size and scale, just one’



This is the first time, and no doubt the last, that my column begins with an EU report. Before you turn over to Mark Walton, let me urge perseverance.

In a damning report on European competitiveness, former Italian PM Mario Draghi points out how rubbish Europe is at new tech, at start-ups and at economic growth. This includes new EV makers. In one paragraph, he says: ‘Europe is nowadays stuck in a static industrial structure… The leading firms in research and investment spending are the same ones we had 20 years ago.’

A few other highlights: ‘There is no EU company with a market capitalisation over €100 billion that has been set-up from scratch in the last 50 years, while all six US companies with a valuation above $1 trillion have been created in this period.’ (In the UK, there is one such company, semi-conductor and software designer Arm.)

Which brings me to EVs. The list of US EV start-ups includes market leader Tesla, Rivian and Lucid, as well as lesser-known Nikola, Canoo and more. In China, new EV makers pop up regularly: Xiaomi, Li Auto, Nio, Neta, XPeng, Zeekr, Leapmotor, and more. Never heard of them? Sadly for Europe’s car makers, you will.

Then there’s BYD. Not an EV start-up but the global leader in electrified vehicles, and just 21 years old.

And how many European EV car-maker start-ups are there? Of any size and scale, just one. That’s Polestar, based in Sweden but co-founded and largely funded by China’s Geely, and part-owned by Volvo. Sadly, Polestar – ‘Europe’s Tesla’ – struggles. I say ‘sadly’ because I like Polestars and I like Thomas Ingenlath, until recently its CEO, and previously design boss of Volvo.

Polestar has had a bad 12 months. Sales have dropped (down 23 per cent globally), losses have deepened ($1.46 billion), its share price has collapsed ($1.34 as I write in late October, down from a high of over $15 in late 2021) and Ingenlath, the founding CEO, has departed (and we must assume not in the way he would have wanted).

I first met Thomas 12 years ago, just after he took over the top Volvo design job. We got on well – Thomas is a *CAR* reader – and soon he was showing me previews of upcoming cars, all hush-hush.

Like all great design bosses, he fought doggedly to get his way. Volvo’s former engineering chief Peter Mertens once told me that working with Thomas was more like working for him. That’s why I wasn’t surprised when Ingenlath made the unusual step of moving from design boss to company CEO. If anyone could, Thomas could.

Under Ingenlath, Polestars prioritised design and driving enjoyment – appealing qualities, at least to me. It has succeeded at the former (Ingenlath’s speciality) and to a lesser extent at the latter.

Thomas is also an Anglophile. He went to design school at the RCA in London and loved it. It’s one reason why 400 engineers work in an advanced Polestar R&D centre in Coventry, responsible for the platforms of the upcoming 5 (a four-door GT) and 6 (a sports car).

‘British engineering is more vivid than the functional German mindset. You challenge convention,’ Thomas told me.

So, why does Polestar struggle? For nearly all of Ingenlath’s reign, it had only one model, the 2. It has struggled in the brutally competitive premium EV sector against better-resourced and better-known rivals, including Audi, BMW, Mercedes – and Volvo.

As Polestar UK MD Matt Galvin told me, mandating a minimum penetration of EV sales in the UK (and in Europe) hasn’t helped. ‘It’s creating a market that’s not only artificial but incredibly competitive.’ Polestar has had to discount heavily.

Two striking new cars, the recently sampled and pleasingly alternative 3 and 4, will clearly help. Once the 5 (due next year) and 6 (in 2026) arrive, Polestar should have a rich product portfolio.

Add Geely’s EV technical nous and wealth, and Volvo’s car-making skills, and there are reasons to be cheerful. Shame the man who, in good part, conceived Polestar won’t be around to enjoy any success.

Former *CAR* editor Gavin Green is our contributor-in-chief and one of the world’s foremost commentators on automotive matters

Illustration: Peter Strain

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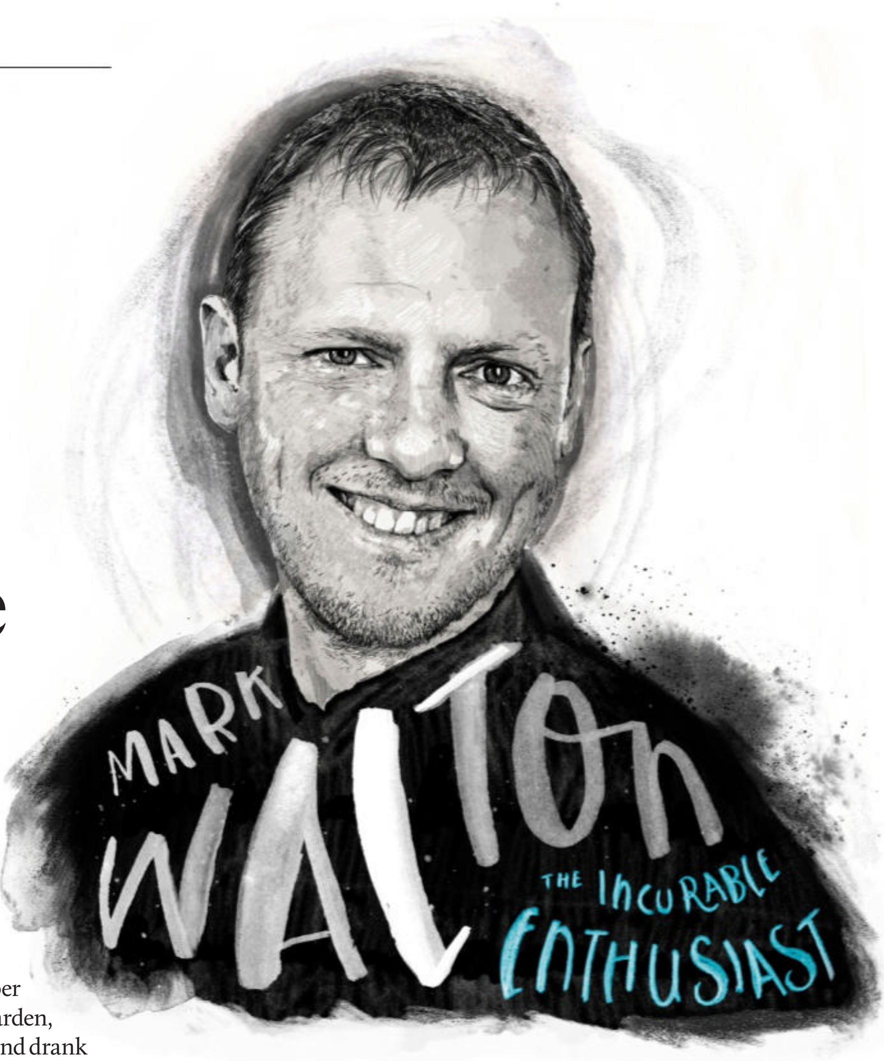
‘I saw a Mk1 Mondeo the other day. Wow! When was the last time I saw one of those?’



Hedgehogs are going extinct. I know this, not just by reading the news but through personal experience too. As a kid I remember coming across hedgehogs in the garden, including a friendly one that came and drank a bowl of milk at my feet and then bumbled off like a character from a Beatrix Potter book. Older readers will remember the spiny roadkill that was splattered the length and breadth of Britain, and the old jokes – remember the jokes? ‘Why did the hedgehog cross the road? Because he wanted to see his flatmate!’ No, you’re right. Doesn’t seem funny now…

Thing is, hedgehogs have disappeared steadily but imperceptibly, like the story of the frog boiled in water. No, that’s not another sick joke. I mean, it’s happened so discreetly, so gradually, it’s only when someone asks, ‘When did you last see one?’ that your brain acknowledges the change.

I’m feeling the same way about a number of cars, that were recently so familiar you wouldn’t even notice them, but now there are none around to notice. I saw a Ford Mondeo Mk1 the other day – I thought, ‘Wow, when was the last time I saw one of those?’ The Mondeo was a great car when it went on sale in 1993, so pervasive it became a demographic stereotype. The 24-valve V6 version was poised and fast and surprisingly entertaining. You want to know how many are left? The brilliant website howmanyleft.co.uk reckons there are only seven examples of the V6 still on the road. SEVEN! Can you believe it? You’re as likely to see a Bugatti Royale driving down the street. And it’s not alone – lots of everyday cars are now going the way of the hedgehog: Vauxhall Cavaliers, the Rover Metro, pretty much any Renault of the ’90s. And I’ve spoken before about my so-far fruitless search for an original, unmolested 1999-2004 Fiat Multipla, the ugly pre-facelift six-seater. Yes, the one that looks like the actual frog boiled in water. They’ve vanished.

Now, you could say that it’s normal for these humdrum cars to disappear, as their working lives come to an end and their values drop, but I think the rate of extinction has accelerated. Scrappage schemes and plug-in-vehicle grants have played their part, but I think expectations have changed dramatically too. Back in the ’80s and early ’90s, there wasn’t a huge difference between a new car and what was then a 20-year-old Austin Maxi or Renault 16 – ‘fuel’ still meant petrol, engines were mechanical, exhausts coughed out throat-clutching fumes and the radio played Terry Wogan. There was no ABS, no airbags, no touchscreens and no nav.

Compare that to now. The tech revolution that’s taken place since the ’90s means cars from that era now seem positively ancient. Forget minor advances in carburettor technology – modern buyers aren’t interested if they can’t plug their phones in.

This hit home when I drove the new Revuelto the other day. Far from heading to extinction, the new Lamborghini proves that monstrously powerful V12s are impressively, shockingly alive. This is a car that makes you feel like you’re being beaten up in a 1000bhp tumble dryer, the forces are so savage. It might be a hybrid, but it’s still ferocious and intimidating, as wide as an American pick-up and as low as a cheese toasty. Driving it makes your eyes widen, your hair stand up, your adrenaline pump.

So why, for God’s sake why, have they fitted a letterbox-shaped touchscreen in front of the passenger? The idea that your passenger would rather be looking down at a screen, scrolling through their Spotify playlist, rather than eyes-up, brain trained on the next bend that’s hurtling towards you like a red-hot meteor from outer space, is just baffling. ‘Why have you done that?’ I asked the marketing person, pointing at the dashboard. ‘Because these days our customers demand it,’ she replied with a smile.

See what I mean? Modern buyers in every sector, with every budget, want their cars to be an extension of their phones. Anything built before the year 2014 BC (Before CarPlay) is as dead as a dodo. Or as dead as a hedgehog, as they’ll no doubt be saying in 2030.

Editor-at-large Mark Walton can only be adjusted manually and features a snug, driver-focused cockpit devoid of touchscreens

Illustration: Peter Strain

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BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY

The new BMW M5 is a plug-in hybrid. The perfect blend of petrol (Audi RS6) and electric (Porsche Taycan), then?

Words Ben Barry **Photography** Jordan Butters

Flying west at a very healthy lick, despite the absence of light or dry tarmac, BMW's new plug-in hybrid M5 is dispatching pre-dawn miles like a pebble skimmed perfectly over a tarn. It compresses rhythmically on its suspension and takes giant strides each time I dip into its 717bhp performance. Slip roads and bridges strobe past as tiny touchpoints on the surface.

The M5's astonishing velocity proves so accessible and its chassis so stoic that, were the M50 a derestricted autobahn, I'd probably settle at 150mph as if it were a gentle canter. As it is I have to exercise serious self-restraint simply to avoid appearing on the news, let alone in the local magistrates' court.

This much you'd expect of a super saloon that's more powerful than any of its predecessors. But it's when I leave the boring roads and head for the valleys that the M5 truly starts to get under my skin.

The road wraps around the contours of the landscape, clinging to mountainsides as the surface ripples over subsidence and snakes between imposing rocks and walls. That endless slug of power continues to define the M5, but there's a dexterity here at odds with a body as long as a last-gen 7-series, not to mention somewhat chunkier.

M xDrive easily deals with the surplus of power. There's total composure with a strong bias to the rear in its standard setting, but slackening stability control to 'unlock' 4WD Sport mode is like exploring a powerful rear-driven car's outer limits with an unintrusive safety net. No doubt the track being some 75mm wider at the front and 48mm at the rear compared to a regular 5-series helps.

I roll speed into corners like I'm sending a bowling ball at 10 pins, and when I get back on the throttle at the apex the rear tyres chew at the surface and the M5 yaws just a fraction while gathering speed at a furious rate. Its footprint means the M5 can't disguise being a very large car, but never does it feel close to unravelling here.

It's even nicely balanced in full rear-drive mode, though the M5 is now a long way beyond making that a sensible proposition for most driving (not least because M has opted to omit the variable traction control of other M cars).

Three hours after leaving home, I roll into a Welsh car park as hybrid mode kills the M5's engine. There's no one for miles and all I can hear when I lower the windows is the crunch of tyres on gravel and the lazy slice of wind-turbine blades cutting the air overhead. Everything that dares breaks the silence is amplified like ASMR on noise-cancelling headphones. Blimey. Is this the most rounded performance car I've ever driven? It just might be.

To get some context on that, I'm here to meet two rivals – the V8-powered Audi RS6 Performance and the all-electric Porsche Taycan Turbo, both of which enjoy recent-ish updates and represent the two opposing schools of thought M mulled in M5 development.

Neither will be able to stretch quite like the M5, but they might just do the most important bit in the middle better.

Starting from £116,120, the Audi comes in a little pricier than the £111,405 M5, produces 621bhp and officially returns 22.4mpg. The Taycan Turbo, meanwhile, costs £134,100, extends to – yes – 872bhp in its overboost mode and can now stretch for up to 376 miles between charges, according to WLTP figures.

Parked alongside the M5, the visual differences are stark. The BMW's dramatic if polarising design echoes Chris Bangle's E60 M5 in its avant-garde surfacing (maybe Doctor Who's K-9 too with its pyramidal taper and largely featureless flanks?), where the Audi blends sophistication with muscularity and the Taycan is pebble-smooth and gorgeously low-slung; it does the 911-with-more-doors thing far better than any Panamera ever has.

Perhaps astonishingly, both rivals are significantly lighter than the 2435kg BMW, and both have superior power-to-weight ratios – if only by a solitary bhp in the case of the 296bhp-per-tonne Audi. ▶

PERHAPS ASTONISHINGLY, BOTH RIVALS ARE SIGNIFICANTLY LIGHTER THAN THE 2435KG BMW

717bhp – an enabler of attitude

The M5 works miracles hiding its weight

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Weren't screens meant to make life simpler?

Partly we have uncertainty around electrification to thank for both the M5's multi-tasking genius and a kerbweight more than 500kg chunkier than its hardly svelte predecessor, because when BMW's M division began development of the G90 M5 five years ago, the outlook was so confused it decided to pack everything just in case. Increasingly this looks to have been a shrewd call.

In addition to the 4.4-litre twin-turbo V8 descended from the F10 two generations back, and the eight-speed auto and M xDrive all-wheel drive introduced with the F90 last time around, M has packaged an electric motor in the gearbox, plus a chunky lithium-ion battery with a usable capacity of 18.6kWh.

The latter accounts for around 220kg of the M5's heft, is tucked either side of the transmission tunnel and required so much under-body bracing to bring it up to M standards that the team skipped Christmas holidays in 2022. (It's also why you sit a fraction higher than before.)

The performance stats are astonishing. The V8 produces 577bhp and 553lb ft, the e-motor lends a further 194bhp of instant muscle for 717bhp and 738lb ft all in, yet it's good for over 40 miles and can travel at up to 87mph on e-power alone (though not both at the same time).

Crucially, with the battery depleted, BMW still claims a max 27.7mpg – a figure that not only improves on its predecessor by 2mpg but smokes the Audi by 5mpg too.

It's both a mighty engine and a beautifully integrated powertrain, stand-outs being the smoothness of its transitions between petrol and electric, a midrange that swells like a tidal surge and throttle response so instant it's like the e-motor is permanently poised in its blocks, waiting for the starting pistol.

Its lovely warm burble is punctuated by percussive little explosions that rumble each time I back off. When I pull and hold the left paddleshift to drop as many gears as possible and activate Boost mode, the M5 takes off like a firework that's toppled over. It's phenomenal.

Never mind that power-to-weight actually falls compared with the previous M5 and that it's a fraction more leisurely to 62mph at 3.5 seconds; the muscle and synaptic connection here represent awesome progress.

But if the M5 is extremely good, it is also imperfect. Complexity threatens to overwhelm the driving experience, with so many elements to configure – multiple modes for hybrid settings alone, far more to tweak dampers, steering, brake pedal feel etc – that even storing two preferences in M1 and M2 shortcut buttons feels clunky.

Perhaps more troublingly, the M5's suspension tenses so dramatically over one particularly challenging section of moorland that its Comfort setting feels more like a Sport+. Hmm.

While James Dennison heads out to get us a second opinion, I swap into the RS6.

First impressions? The infotainment might be inferior to the BMW's, but the Audi has the nicer cabin, one that looks strikingly uncluttered and clean after its chintzier rival. You sit down lower than in the M5, in supportive sports seats that have a little extra squish in their bases, and grip a slender steering-wheel rim wrapped in highly textured alcantara.

Simply running your hands over this wheel at a standstill makes the RS6 feel lighter and more agile than the M5's leather-wrapped chubber, and that's exactly how it translates to the road. It's not exactly chatty, but there is more surface fizz than in the M5, making the newcomer feel aloof and isolated in comparison.

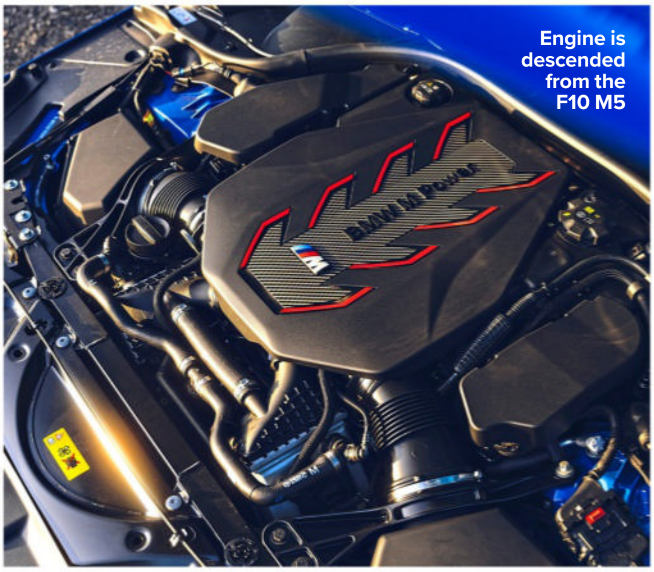
RS6 fundamentals remain unchanged, meaning a twin-turbocharged 4.0-litre V8 with a dash of mild-hybrid assistance plus an eight-speed torque-converter auto and all-wheel drive. But Audi has now replaced the base model with the RS6 Performance, bumping pricing by £15k while sweetening the deal with extras including the brilliant Bang & Olufsen 3D sound system and 22-inch alloys.

There's also a new centre differential and a gentle 30bhp/37lb ft performance tickle for 621bhp with 627lb ft torque all in, while 8kg less of sound deadening lets a little extra V8 music through to the cabin – a lovely bassy *bob-a-bob-bob* that manages to be both richly cultured and goose-bump exciting when you get on it.

This TFSI might hit snooze until 2300rpm and can't respond as crisply to the throttle as the M5, but it's muscular in the midrange, fires down the road in great lunges and has the most authentic, engaging soundtrack on test.

'The engine is utterly brilliant, especially now with the E63 AMG gone,' notes JD. 'It sounds like a hot rod, goes like a train, drinks ▶

THE M5'S LOVELY WARM BURBLE IS PUNCTUATED BY PERCUSSIVE LITTLE EXPLOSIONS


Engine is descended from the F10 M5

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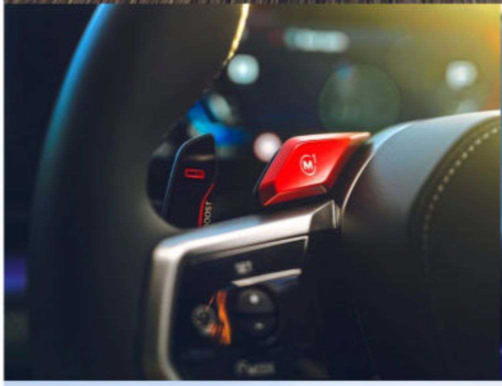
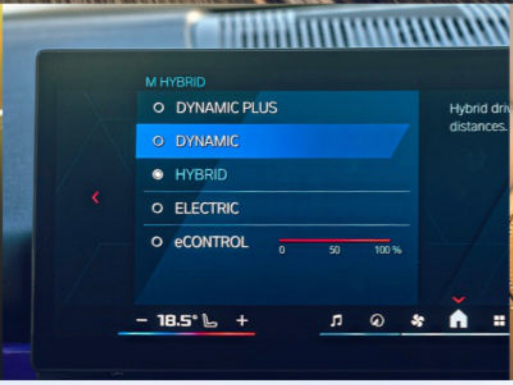
M5 is the ‘slowest’ car here at 3.5sec 0-62mph

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1589bhp about to fire off into the distance

RATCHET ITS CHASSIS UP VIA THE BALANCED SETTING AND THE RS6 PALPABLY TIGHTENS

fuel when you're on it and settles down when you're not.'

Our car's Carbon Vorsprung spec throws in virtually every extra save carbon-ceramic brakes and bumps pricing to £133,520. That's a dead heat for our M5's as-tested price thanks to the £19.5k Ultimate pack, which includes carbon-ceramic brakes.

Important to our Audi's driving experience is Dynamic Ride Control with its coil springs and diagonally interlinked dampers that replace regular air springs, plus 'forged-milled' alloys some 20kg lighter than the stock 22s. Both are fitted to Vorsprung models as standard.

Any fears that the Audi's upgraded suspension might be a compromise evaporate as soon as I head over the same moorland stretch that wrong-footed the M5. It is, to be fair, an unusually horrid surface, but the RS6 smooths over its corrugated ripples where the M5 jiggles, and generally allows its body a longer leash.

'The RS6 deals with all types of road surface really well,' notes JD later. 'It also feels like the suspension has more room to breathe than the M5, which is far more rigidly locked down. Feels weird to say it in the context of an RS6, but it's the more compact car by a margin.'

Ratchet its chassis up via the Balanced setting and the RS6 palpably tightens its muscles to the detriment of some comfort around town, but its underlying elasticity remains as speeds rise and simply feels more cohesive.

In fact, this car feels like it's been sharpened on a whetstone after the near-identical Carbon Vorsprung I drove earlier this year, something most logically attributed to it wearing the Continental Sport Contact 7s as standard, not the Hankooks with which the previous press car was equipped. (That said, the M5 we're driving wears Hankooks and feels fine.)

The Audi's variable-rate steering and all-wheel steer feel more responsive than before, perhaps to the extent of being over-keen given I'm taking so many nibbles at the wheel to get through a corner. Nice agility, yes, but I'd calm it down a tad and perhaps use the M5 as a reference – it encourages more confident sweeps at the wheel despite having variable steering and all-wheel steer, too.

With the standard Sport differential left in its more relaxed settings there's occasionally some front-end push on damp, quicker turns. But in its Dynamic setting the RS6 really hooks up – good turn-in, nice mid-corner body control with a hint of rotation and rear-biased traction that lets you flatten the throttle with only the tiniest chirrup from the rubber.

Remember when Audis had lead for shocks and understeered like a dog after a squirrel? Not this one.

I pull back in and swap notes with James, who's grinning after his first miles in the M5. 'It's so confidence-inspiring and the steering and front end make it feel surprisingly delicate,' he enthuses. 'Variable-ratio steering and rear-wheel steering no doubt contribute, but I really like how you can move the M5 around just using your wrists. It hook ups so well if you want and with the electric motor you can fire it off from the corner like a rocket. Only the sense of width makes it feel so incredibly large.'

And the RS6? 'Handles better than any RS6 I can remember,' he concurs. 'The steering is too light just off centre for my liking, so you don't have that feeling of instant connection you do in the BMW. The rear-wheel steering *is* aggressive, but it didn't bother me.'

Take note of the thin steering wheel, BMW

Spot the difference with the Gen 1 car

Doubtless a significant number of you are looking at the M5 and RS6 and thinking 'like that, but without the benefit-in-kind bill', in which case the excellent Porsche Taycan remains the default choice for good reason.

Refreshed earlier in 2024, key updates across the board include extra power and acceleration, a 12kWh larger battery for additional range (always the Taycan's undoing) and faster charging at up to 320kW – a 50kW increase. There's also a handy charging planner integrated with the infotainment that prioritises faster chargers with 150kW-plus.

Our Turbo spec sees power rise by 81bhp, with its maximum 872bhp available for 10-second bursts (basically all the time, then…), while claimed range stretches a highly useful 78 miles to 394 miles. As before, there are two e-motors, all-wheel drive and a two-speed transmission on the rear.

A base price of £134,100 matches the 'as-optioned' price of the others, but extras push the Porsche to £167,415, with rear-axle ▶

Taycan touchscreen the most modest here

A badge with 40 years of breeding

THE TAYCAN'S STEERING HAS A COOL, CLEAN PRECISION THAT LETS YOU PLACE IT PERFECTLY

steering (£1593) and Active Ride Control (£6291) most relevant to how this car drives – the latter upgrade combines air suspension with motor-controlled trick dampers to proactively dial out pitch and roll.

You sit down low in a perfect driving position on comfortable, supportive seats, with the Taycan's low scuttle affording an excellent view forwards and a small-diameter steering wheel immediately teeing up a sporting drive. The little drive-mode controller that floats like a satellite below the right-hand spoke makes tweaking settings easier than in either the Audi or BMW.

James thinks the Taycan feels heaviest of the three at an amble, but fundamentally the handling is superb as I glide and swoop through sequences of corners like I'm on a toboggan run.

The steering has a cool, clean precision that lets you place it perfectly, the chassis shrugs off tricky secondary imperfections that fluster the M5 and you absolutely feel how little weight resides over the front axle and how much of the stuff is low down *between* the axles – you'd probably need a centrifuge to pull more *g*.

Rear-wheel steer is so natural I notice only the overall agility rather than an odd pivoting sensation, while Active Ride Control feels superbly integrated too.

It leans into corners in its more sporting modes and keeps the body flat during acceleration and braking, and while that could so easily feel like a simulator, the reality is entirely seamless.

Driven in almost all scenarios, the Taycan's chassis feels impeccably resolved. Its undoing proves to be a sequence of primary undulations where the road bucks over subsidence – the Taycan just about parries the first hit, but immediately feels wayward as it rebounds and then fully bottoms out, smashing into its rear bump stops. To be clear, this *is* a pretty extreme section that also challenges the others, but only the Taycan runs out of answers.

'The handling is great right up to the limit, at which point the mask well and truly slips and the Taycan feels its weight,' agrees James. 'The RS6 and especially the M5 are much better at keeping things together near the limit.'

We all reserve another black mark for the brake pedal, which is so vague that at one alarming point Piers Ward thought he'd pressed the accelerator and was about to travel as the crow flies. Everyone finds the softness unnerving.

This is a shame, because the Taycan is more rewarding to drive when its chassis does more heavy lifting, and having a dependable brake pedal is key to that. When I rely more on the e-motors to carry speed through twistier sections, I'm always aware how much energy there is under my right foot.

As a result I tend to corner using a fraction of the throttle, which means a layer of interaction is absent – that feeling of digging into the power you get with the petrol cars, of adjusting their potential by short-shifting gears to get the power down, feeling the urge build, the friction at the surface.

Instead this is a binary sensation of cornering on a breath of throttle then pushing it to the floor and essentially becoming a passenger for a few seconds, a kind of giddy thrill-ride sensation. For me, the novelty quickly wears off.

We all admire the Taycan and enjoy driving it, but it does leave it looking a little shaky as we reconvene to discuss our podium… ▶

Four doors each, three very different results

FINAL RECKONING

SEARCHING FOR THE HAPPY MIDDLE

Pitching a Taycan Turbo against petrol-engined icons was always a stress test, but it comes away with its head held high. It looks superb, feels beautifully built and drives with a fleet-footedness shot through with true Porsche finesse, while improved efficiency, a larger battery and faster charging greatly reduce the Taycan's biggest weakness.

It is not, however, entirely convincing. An output of 872bhp is crushing but leaves us craving more depth, as impeccable handling ultimately runs out of answers in more extreme circumstances.

That's all pretty inconsequential in the context of saving thousands on a company-car scheme – but on a level playing field, the Taycan places third.

Given we're judging these rivals against performance criteria, it'd be perverse to put one that wasn't as engaging to drive ahead of another that ultimately out-performed it. Which is why the Audi is second.

Its exterior design is arguably more pleasing, its cabin calmer and more elegant. Its V8 engine is also more characterful than the M5's, plus it's hundreds of kilos lighter, feels more compact on the road and offers more delicate steering.

Shod with Contis and optioned on Dynamic Ride Control suspension, the RS6 handles with sure-footed dynamism and strikes a better balance of chassis control and compliance.

But the M5 takes performance to another level. Adding electrification to M's V8 only intensifies the experience, endowing the M5 with the kind of high-rpm ferocity that makes the Taycan feel one-dimensional and even the RS6 a little short of breath.

Its chassis matches the RS6's all-weather security but adds more poise, even in its more conservative setting, and far more adjustable handling in 4WD Sport and RWD modes. Variable-ratio steering and all-wheel steer are also more seamlessly integrated than the Audi's similar hardware, snapping up the M5's responses without ever feeling over-egged.

Our lead-footed testing averaged only 13.5mpg but that's to overlook the 30-plus miles of e-power in reserve, all harvested on the go. With routine charging, the potential for huge efficiency gains is self-evident.

Few cars stretch like that. M5 for the win.

1st

BMW M5

Too big and too heavy but marries epic performance and incredible handling

★★★★★

2nd

AUDI RS6

A fabulous daily driver that bristles with V8 character and knows how to entertain

★★★★★

3rd

PORSCHE TAYCAN TURBO

Improved efficiency and agile handling but Taycan ultimately lacks rivals' engagement

★★★★★

WATCH THE VIDEO!

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BMW M5

▶ What's the line-up?

Plug-in hybrid V8 gives seventh-gen M5 bandwidth like never before, whether you want to drive emissions-free or smoke up 717bhp through its rear tyres. Cheapest-on-test at… £111,405.

▶ Data

Price £111,405 (£133,670 as tested) **Powertrain** 18.6kWh battery, 4395cc 32v twin-turbo V8, eight-speed auto, all-wheel drive **Performance** 717bhp @ 5600rpm, 738lb ft @ 1800rpm, 3.5sec 0-62mph, 191mph **Weight** 2435kg **Efficiency** 148.7-176.6mpg (claimed), 13.5mpg (tested), 1963-2331-mile range (claimed), 178 miles (tested), 37-39g/km CO2 **Length/width/height** 5096/1970/1510mm **Boot capacity** 466 litres

AUDI RS6

▶ What's the line-up?

The, erm, lightest car on test – twin-turbo V8, eight-speed auto and all-wheel drive. In 'Performance' guise, it means more power and a new centre diff. Carbon Vorsprung spec throws in every option.

▶ Data

Price £133,520 (£133,520 as tested) **Powertrain** 3996cc 32v twin-turbo V8, eight-speed auto, all-wheel drive **Performance** 621bhp @ 6000rpm, 627lb ft @ 2300rpm, 3.4sec 0-62mph, 174mph (limited) **Weight** 2100kg **Efficiency** 22.4mpg (claimed), 12.5mpg (tested), 360-mile range (claimed), 201 miles (tested), 286g/km CO2 **Length/width/height** 4995/1951/1460mm **Boot capacity** 565 litres

PORSCHE TAYCAN TURBO

▶ What's the line-up?

Porsche's electric icon is freshly updated with more power and faster acceleration, plus it boasts swifter charge times and an increased range. Here in Turbo guise, it makes 872bhp and costs £134,100.

▶ Data

Price £134,100 (£167,485 as tested) **Powertrain** 97kWh battery, twin e-motors, two-speed gearbox, all-wheel drive **Performance** 697bhp (872bhp with launch control), 657lb ft, 2.7sec 0-62mph, 162mph **Weight** 2290kg **Efficiency** 3.5 miles per kWh (claimed), 1.9 miles per kWh (tested), 394-mile range (claimed), 184 miles (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Length/width/height** 4962/1966/1381mm **Boot capacity** 366 litres (plus 84-litre frunk)

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THE SPECIAL ONE

Bugatti sits at the top of the automotive food chain – the new 1775bhp, V16 Tourbillon is proof of that. But it was this car, the Type 35, that put it there. We drive it

Words Mark Walton **Photography** Lee Brimble

Bugatti recently unleashed the wildly ambitious, intellectually absorbing and technically bewildering Tourbillon, a hybrid V16 to ensure the brand will capture the imaginations of speed freaks everywhere for at least another generation. And Bugatti does moments like few other car makers. Think the Chiron and Veyron, and think too of the little boat-like work of art Bugatti created 100 years ago…

It's 1924 and you're about to step into Bugatti's brand new hypercar. There are no gullwing doors, just an open cockpit you drop into like a bath. Inside, there's a small bench and a gigantic four-spoke steering wheel. The gap between the wheel and the seat is narrow, and the only way to get your legs in is to stand on the seat, get your feet under the wooden rim and then pull the car towards you, like you're pulling on a pair of trousers.

The technical specification of this new hypercar is absolutely out of this world. Let's compare it to a family car launched the previous year, the Austin 7 of 1923. The Austin's 747cc four-cylinder puts out 10bhp through a three-speed gearbox. Top speed might be 50mph downhill – uphill, you'll be in first gear and a man walking a dog could overtake you.

Imagine, then: the 1924 Bugatti has a 2.0-litre straight-eight that puts out a gigantic 90bhp through a four-speed 'box. Its sleek alloy body is low to the ground thanks to groundbreaking suspension design, and it rolls on cutting-edge alloy wheels.

Fast-forward to 1927 and the new, improved Type 35B is powered by a supercharged 2.3-litre straight-eight, putting out a stratospheric 135bhp, offering a top speed in excess of 130mph. It costs a mind-boggling 100,000 French francs, or £1150 – enough to buy a substantial house in London.

Can you imagine driving your Austin 7 at 40mph and being overtaken by one of these, travelling at three times your velocity?

Ettore Bugatti was 43 when he designed the 35. He wasn't exactly the Elon Musk of his day, but Ettore was a genius, a maverick, an entrepreneur and an artist, with a gift for seeing mechanical solutions that others couldn't. While Henry Ford was perfecting the modern production line in the US, Bugatti's boutique workshop was meticulously hand-crafting cars that were minimalist and forensic in their design, lavish in their no-expense-spared specification.

Born in Milan, Ettore served an apprenticeship with a bicycle manufacturer. Obsessed with the still-novel idea of motor cars, he built his own dual-engined tricycle called the Type 1 while a teenager. In 1901 his Type 2, a proper car with four wheels and a 3.1-litre engine, was exhibited in Milan, earning the young Ettore a prize and a new ▶

One always needs a scarf when one goes vintage

Ettore wasn't exactly the Elon Musk of his day but he was a genius

CHOPARD
2016

The extraordinary Julia de Baldanza and her beloved Bugatti

You don't need to be Newey to appreciate the Bugatti's aero

Two years later a package arrived for her at Heathrow. It was a Bugatti Type 35B, chassis 4965

job, working for Lorraine-Dietrich, the pioneering car company. That's why he moved to the Alsace region where, in 1909, he started his own company aged 28.

So the Type 35 was far from his first rodeo. But it was his first purpose-built racing car, designed for the 2.0-litre Grand Prix rules of the day. With the distinctions between racing and roadgoing cars blurred back then, the Type 35 could enter a Grand Prix one weekend, win an endurance race the next and then drive you home with your trophies on the passenger seat. The Type 35 was such a step forward, the results flooded in – it won the Targa Florio five years in a row from 1925, the 1926 Grand Prix world championship and the first Monaco GP. Altogether, it's reckoned the Type 35 won 2000 races.

But the remarkable thing about the Bugatti Type 35 is that this isn't ancient history. While lots of pre-war cars are now in museums, the 35 is as popular and active today as it was a century ago.

The example you see here belongs to called Julia de Baldanza. Born in Buenos Aires, Julia is a self-confessed Anglophile who moved to the UK 40 years ago. As well as a significant car collection, she's also a pilot with a vintage plane and a helicopter licence.

'In Argentina, our idols are motor cars and football!' she smiles. 'Though I was always more interested in engines than cars. My father had an old Cadillac and I remember I used to lie down between the seats and listen to the blum-blum-blum of the eight cylinders.'

When Julia was a teenager she was told that at the age of two, she'd sat in the lap of the great Juan Manuel Fangio, with whom there was a family connection. 'My aunt told me about it,' says Julia. 'So maybe it was destiny!'

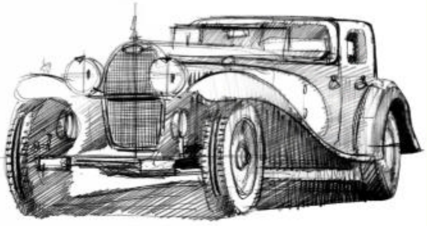
Julia tells me she never thought of owning a Bugatti until some friends invited her and her husband to the first Monaco Historic Grand Prix in 1997. There, she fell in love with the sights and smells of the pre-war race and joked about having a go herself – a joke her husband took seriously. Two years later a package arrived for her at Heathrow. It was a Bugatti Type 35B, chassis 4965, built in 1929 and used as a *voiture d'usine* – or works car – until it was sold to a private owner in France in 1936. It then came to the UK and eventually – decades later – it ended up in the hands of a Japanese collector, who barely used it before selling it to Julia's husband in New York.

Recovering from the shock, Julia took the car to Bugatti specialist Tim Dutton. He immediately urged her to get a racing licence. So Julia got her licence and has been competing in her 35B ever since, entering prestigious events like the Le Mans Classic, Monaco Historic Grand Prix and Goodwood Revival and Festival.

'It's like a part of me, since 1999,' she tells me. 'I am very promiscuous with cars [she also owns a Maserati, an Alfa and a McLaren] – I love them all. Each one has its characteristics. But I feel very comfortable with the Bugatti. It's a very demanding car but I know it very well. It feels like it's part of me.'

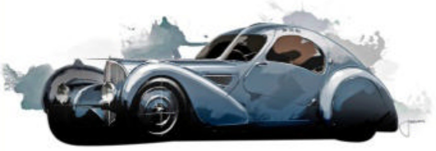
Given how precious it is – even her husband isn't allowed to drive ▶

THE LEGACY MAKERS



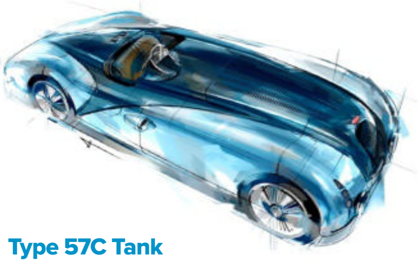
Type 41 Royale

Designed to be the most luxurious car in the world, the Type 41 was 6.4 metres long with a 12.8-litre straight-eight. But it was launched just before the Great Depression in 1927; even royalty didn't want to buy the Royale and only seven were made.



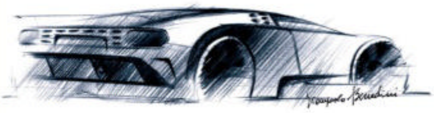
Type 57S Atlantic Coupe

The Type 57 was designed by Ettore's son, Jean Bugatti, in 1934. Over 700 were made, but a handful got a gorgeous Atlantic Coupe body with a dorsal fin down the tail. It's now highly sought after; Ralph Lauren's has been valued at £100 million.



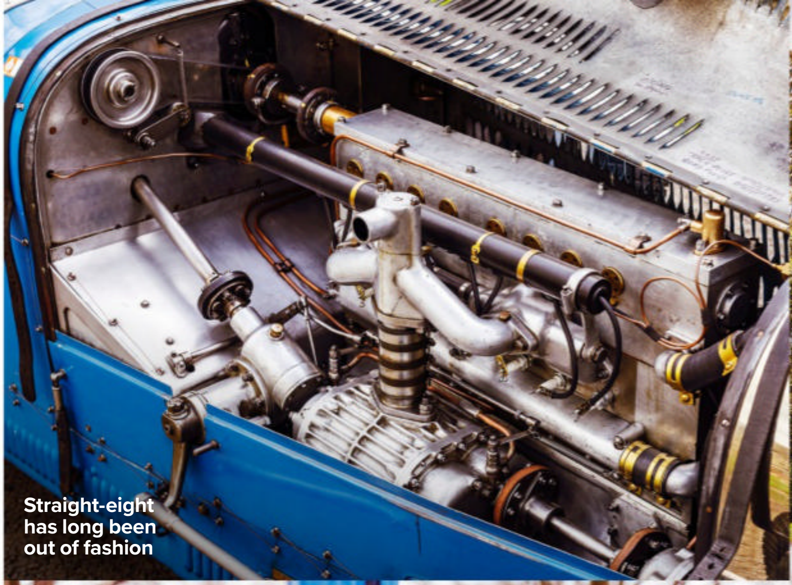
Type 57C Tank

A single factory car was entered into the 1939 Le Mans, a Type 57 'Tank' with an aero body. Against the odds, drivers Jean-Pierre Wimille and Pierre Veyron won the race, Bugatti's last great victory under Ettore.



EB110

Bugatti went bust in 1952 but after 35 years the brand was relaunched by Italian entrepreneur Romano Artioli, who unveiled his EB110 in 1991. With a 3.5-litre quad-turbo V12 and four-wheel drive, its most famous buyer was Michael Schumacher.



Straight-eight has long been out of fashion

> The straight-eight starts up with a vicious snarl – a hard, high-tempo percussion

it – I feel honoured to get behind the wheel. I meet Julia at Tula Precision in the Cotswolds, the Bugatti specialist that now looks after the car for her. Tula's Tommy Waterfield talks me through her 35B as we push it out of the workshop to get it started.

Originality is everything, Tommy tells me, in a world where engines and bodywork were chopped and changed across the decades and 'bitza' cars (politely known as 'chronologically composite' cars) are common.

'Julia's car is a particularly original example because it has a continuous history with no major crashes,' Tommy tells me. As a former works car it's also significant, because it's believed it entered the inaugural Monaco Grand Prix in 1929 and definitely did the second in 1930. Despite this – and despite the value – Julia is like many of Tula's clients in wanting her car to remain alive and in the present. 'Very few of these Type 35s don't get used,' says Tommy, 'because they're still so capable and drivable. Unlike many vintage cars, the steering feels tight, the handling is gorgeous, they go well and stop well.'

Outside in the sun the car looks tiny, almost like a three-quarter-scale model. Then the straight-eight engine starts up, with a surpris-

BUGATTI TYPE 35B

VALUE £2,000,000
POWERTRAIN 2262cc supercharged straight-eight, four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 140bhp @ 5500rpm, 7.0sec 0-62mph, 135mph
WEIGHT 800kg
EFFICIENCY n/a
ON SALE A while ago…

Remember, Mark, the gearbox is the wrong way round

ingly vicious snarl – a hard, crackling, high-tempo percussion that's so loud you have to shout to be heard. Imagine eight shotguns, firing one after the other on endless repeat. It definitely isn't a toy.

Once I'm in and wearing the car, I have to navigate the disconcerting pedals. The throttle is as big as a baked bean, the brake pedal a solid footplate and the clutch is a low rectangle that needs to be nudged forward with your big toe. They're so close together my feet are overlapping and catching on each other.

Then there are the gears. The lever starts outside the car, under your right hand, before curving inwards, through a leather flap in the body, to meet a tiny, open gate under your right thigh. The H pattern is inverted, so first is left and back, second straight forwards, third back and to the right. I think. Gah! Reverse is engaged with a button on the gearstick (like a handbrake) which lifts a little lock-out lever at the base. It's all beautiful and mechanical, but also terrifying – I start mumbling, over and over, 'remember the gearbox is the wrong way round, remember the gearbox is the wrong way round'.

But once we're on the move and onto a wide, sweeping road, the benign side of the Bugatti's character shines through. Demanding, but also great fun.

It's demanding because you have to re-learn some basic hand-eye co-ordination to drive it. You accelerate, roll off the throttle, then think hard about that clutch pedal – and you have to double de-clutch, because it's a crash-box. The clutch is also stiff and the action is brutal, so timing the accelerator with the clutch is critical if you want to drive smoothly. Downshifts need a blip between all that clutch action and of course the whole time you're thinking THE GEARBOX IS THE WRONG WAY ROUND.

While I'm definitely exercised by all this, thankfully I have enough brain capacity to enjoy the simple stuff. There's the engine, impressive even now. The straight-eight is so torquey, strong and purposeful, it pulls hard in any gear at practically any speed. If you wanted to win a Grand Prix it would rev to 7000rpm, but even today, cautiously changing up at 4500, your ears are filled with a fierce, waspish bark, crisp and exact, the sound of fine tolerances. In a car that only weighs 800kg, the acceleration will still jolt you, the car whipping up sudden speed like a leaf caught by a gust.

And that feeling of speed is only magnified by your right elbow hanging out the side, and the wind pulling your hair out by the roots. Looking down through the aeroscreen, you see the elliptic curve of the bonnet, evoking something organic like the muscular neck of a horse. (Ettore owned thoroughbreds.)

And then the steering. Just as Tommy said, the steering is surprisingly tight, with every move of the wooden wheel telegraphed immediately down to the road. That odd, sticky-out positive camber of the front wheels makes the feel car light and eager to turn, and in corners it's sensationally direct and communicative.

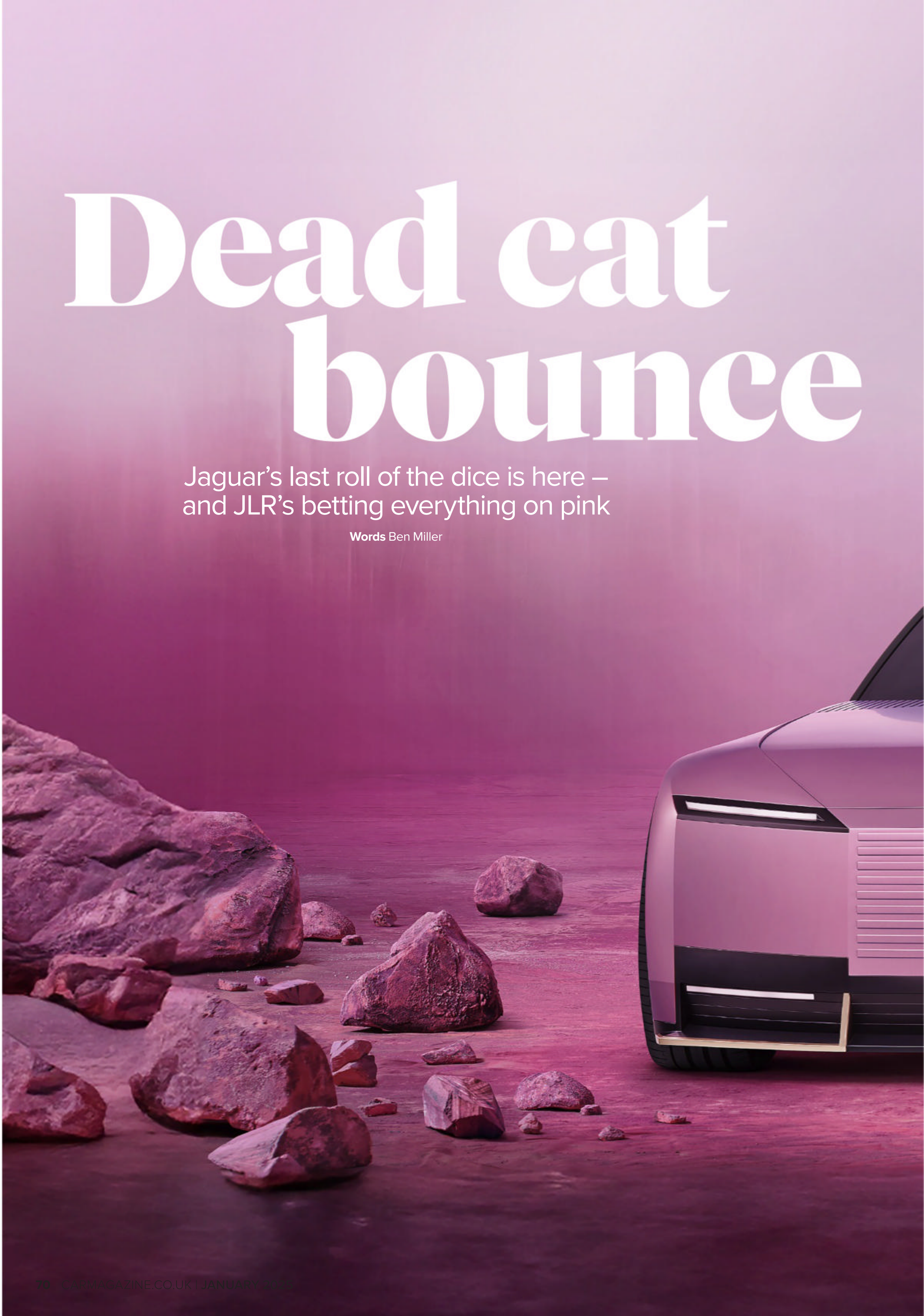
In fact, there isn't a trace of slack in this entire car. Every sinew feels like it's under tension, every component bears its load, nothing feels baggy or superfluous.

After a brief drive, I'm all ready to enter a race in this thing. I can just imagine how confident you'd feel, on the limit of those skinny tyres, drifting around Monaco. Julia agrees: 'I always say, me and my Bugatti, it's like we dance.' car

Dead cat bounce

Jaguar's last roll of the dice is here – and JLR's betting everything on pink

Words Ben Miller



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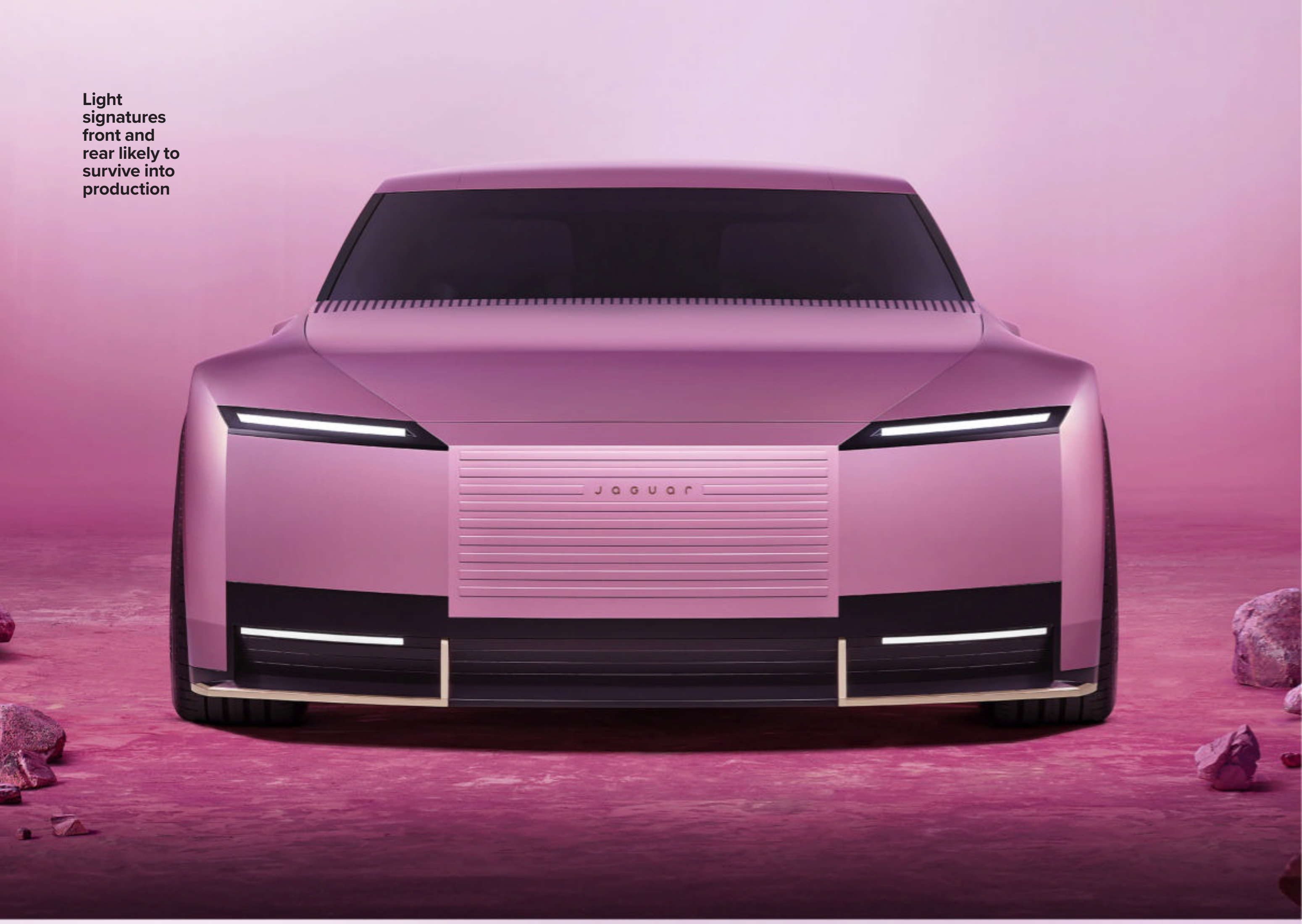
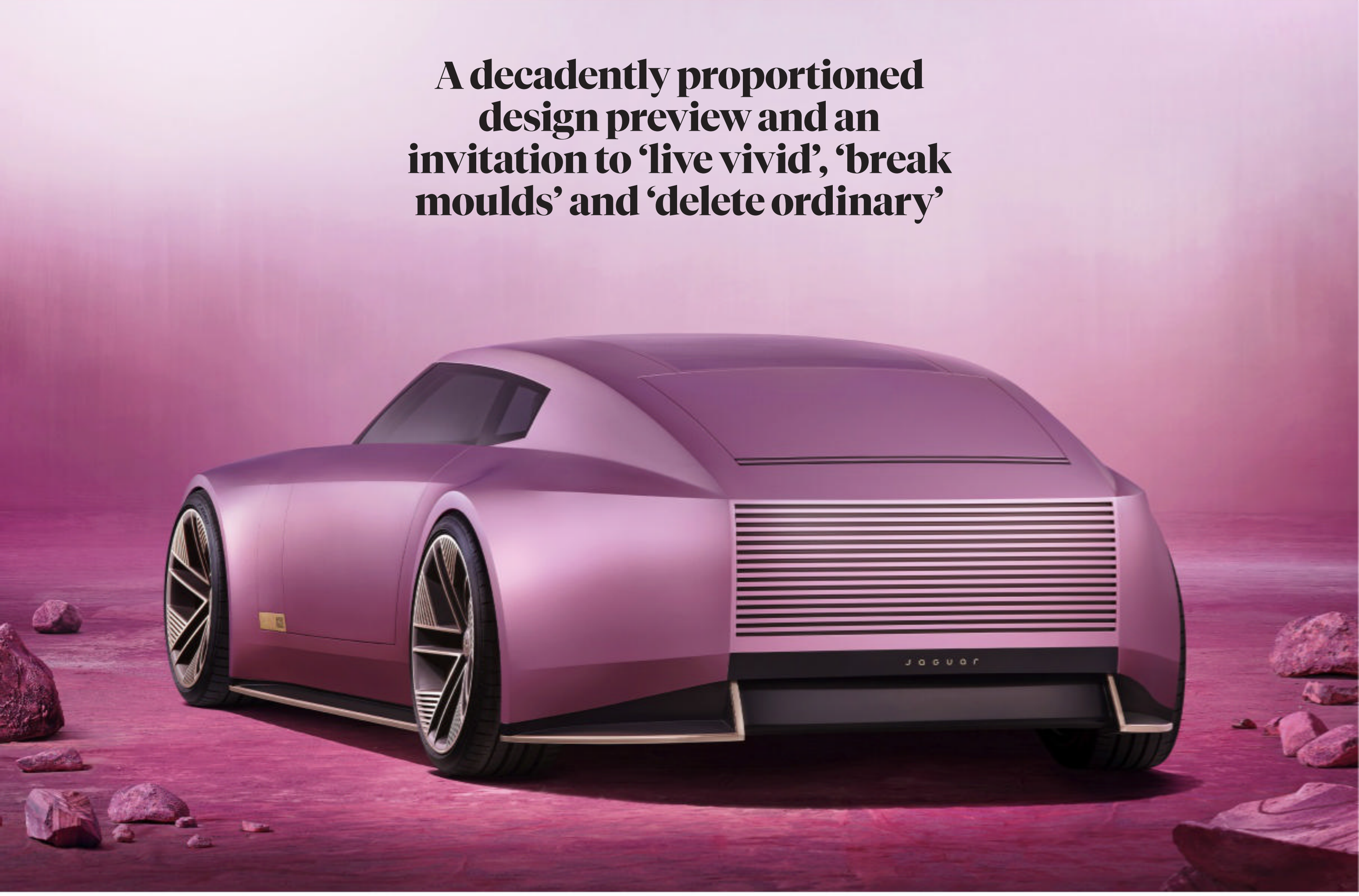


Light signatures front and rear likely to survive into production



A decadently proportioned design preview and an invitation to 'live vivid', 'break moulds' and 'delete ordinary'

A reveal event without jumpy black-and-white period footage, swelling strings and talk of 'icons reborn' is so unusual as to be a welcome aberration. Apart from CEO Adrian Mardell getting a little choked up about the moment he first sat in an E-Type, the Type 00 – the first concrete steer yet on the vision JLR has conjured for Land Rover's less successful sibling – comes into this world naked of history, underlining the point that this is the hardest of hard resets.

Type 00 is a decadently proportioned preview of new Jaguar's design language; the first production car, a four-door GT retaining much of Type 00's aesthetic, is set to arrive in 2026, and there will be an SUV too. The concept is also an invitation from the brand's custodians to 'live vivid', 'break moulds' and 'delete ordinary'.

And it isn't just ordinary that's been deleted, so far-reaching is the scorched (pink) earth approach. We already knew new Jaguar was keen to forget its recent past – XE, XF, XJ, E-Pace et al. 'The last 25 years of playing the volume premium sector – it's not been commercially successful and, if anything, it actually started to tarnish the brand,' MD Rawdon Glover told *CAR* a couple of months ago. But absent too are The Good Old days, certainly in any obvious sense. Sir William Lyons, Le Mans glory, the XK engine, disc brakes and that Enzo quote – none of this, JLR is adamant, can save Jaguar now.

Make no mistake: for Jaguar with JLR *this is it*. Right now you cannot buy a new Jaguar, its dealerships treading water with pre-owned cars – Glover calls the pause a 'firebreak' – as the brand and its network are transformed: from premium volume player to a purveyor of six-figure luxury vehicles; from engines to exclusively electric; from the cloying nostalgia of yesterday to the dawn of a bold tomorrow.

The level of ambition is impressive. New positioning, new target buyer, new brand identity, new design language, new swagger – say what you like about the final product, JLR cannot be accused of not having gone far enough; of failing to grasp the scope of the challenge/opportunity. Unsuccessful though it may have been, old Jaguar's inertia must have been enormous.

But tear it all up JLR has, and you don't have to look far to find the source of its confidence to do so. Its work with Land Rover (Defender, primarily, demand for which shows no sign of decaying, nearly five years after release) and Range Rover (when limited-run £450k special editions sell out in moments, the sky would appear to be the limit) has been astonishingly successful. This year, Land Rover and Range Rover powered Q2 profits of £1.1bn, up 25 per cent year-on-year and JLR's eighth profitable quarter on the bounce.

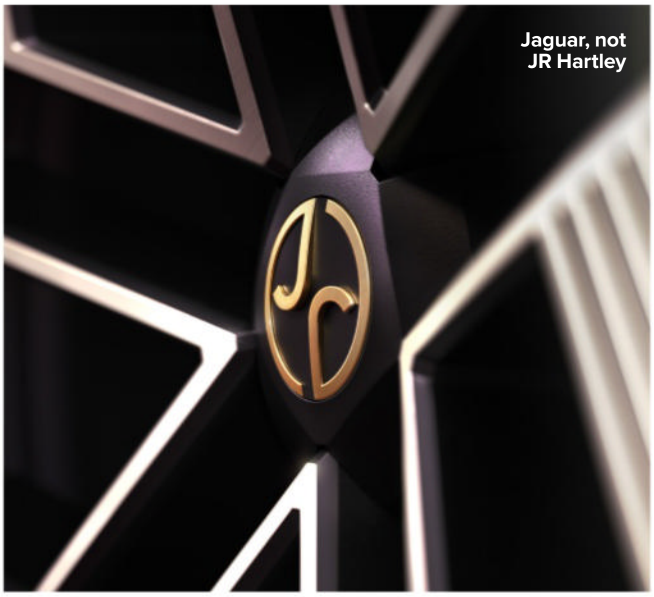
The formula? Create uncompromising cars of standout desirability – it really is that simple. Then just stand back and watch the money pour in like Pablo on pay day. Easy. Why not do the same with Jaguar?

That decision was made back in 2021. Retiring the Jaguar name in favour of starting over wasn't seriously considered. 'There can be no truly successful JLR without a successful Jaguar,' claims chief commercial officer Lennard Hoornik. 'Whether you're Polestar or any of the Chinese brands, they can't create provenance. They can't create history. Why would we throw all that away?' adds MD Glover.

And yet, name aside, plus perhaps a few key characteristics with which Jaguar was once synonymous, everything is new, not least the price point, the rivals and the volumes (Jaguar's refusing to give any steer on how many cars it plans to sell, saying only that its cars will be a rare sight on the road). Exclusivity and pricing power go hand in hand, and heading north of £100,000, as Jaguar will, promises increased profitability (particularly if the brand can inspire its clients to spend big on personalisation) and protects it from Chinese competition – for now, at least. The powertrain (about which we know very little; expect a battery in excess of 100kWh, for more than 400 miles of on-paper range and a Taycan-bothering power output) is all-new and developed in-house but not in itself wildly ambitious.

Everything else is. If all goes to plan, in just five years Jaguar will have gone from selling mainstream SUVs and saloons to being a slightly more affordable electric Bentley. There's even a new name badge (complete with infuriating upper-case G between lower-case bedfellows), a new interpretation of the so-called leaper, a 'maker's mark' (essentially the j and the r, inversions of each other in this new typeface, re-worked into a kind of monogram), a vivid brand colour palette (primary reds, yellows and blues mostly – a world away from old Jaguar's Werther's Original vibe) and a 16-bar motif Jaguar's calling its 'strikethrough'. The latter will be found again and again on the cars as design features, inside them where branding occurs, and in the surrounding eco-system of social media, Jaguar's all-important app and its planned creative partnerships. ▶

JLR cannot be accused of not having gone far enough; of failing to grasp the scale of the challenge/opportunity


Jaguar, not JR Hartley

If this all sounds like the biggest load of nonsense since Prince's re-branding as a symbol, I'd urge you to find the benefit of the doubt. The new badge might be oddly immature but creative director Gerry McGovern and brand design director Richard Stevens are a class act, and much of their work here – whether it fits with your understanding of Jaguar or not – is lovingly crafted, particularly the maker's mark (which appears on Type 00's wheel centres) and the new leaper and 16-bar 'strikethrough' in combination, which somehow feels instantly right as a piece of IP.

Talk to those steering this renaissance, from Mardell through Glover and Hoornik to McGovern, and you sense some differences. Not so much in their interpretations of either the mission or the plan but in terms of how clear or not they stand of old Jaguar's long shadow. You imagine Mardell, for instance, at the back of this group as it forges into the unknown, convinced they're on the right track but unable to stop looking back. Up front, McGovern and Stevens press ahead, old Jaguar for them nothing as prosaic as a direct design influence but instead a set of inspirational intangibles: the importance of creative intellect, exuberant design, permission to polarise.

Hence their baby, Type 00: design think-piece, rolling preview of the forthcoming GT and the embodiment of all this unfettered creativity. They claim they're happy for the response not to be universally positive, but you have to wonder. Really, new Jaguar's aesthetic is fundamental; the wings on which this entire venture will either soar or come crashing down. And when you think about the really successful McGovern cars of the recent past – Defender, original Evoque, the current Range Rover and its immediate predecessor – the naysayers were an inconsequential minority.

Well aware that without desirability it has nothing, new Jaguar has given its 800-strong team of designers the best possible platform for success. Indeed, it claims its cars are electric primarily as a design enabler. 'The plan was always electric, for the complete creative freedom that brings. We needed to break free in order to be able to fulfil the brief; to be a copy of nothing,' insists MD Glover. 'And for us, even if we think EV won't be the primary reason for purchase, it gives us incredible speed, refinement and acceleration. We're really excited about how it's going to drive – it will drive like classic touring Jaguar.'

Is Type 00 what we were expecting? It is. We knew Jaguar planned

Desirability is fundamental; the wings on which this entire venture will either soar or come crashing down

to avoid many of the tropes – including amorphous streamlined forms and cab-forward proportions – commonly associated with EVs. And in many ways the car's ultra-clean surfaces, rejection of fussy details and uninterrupted lines are also a natural extension of the work McGovern and team have been doing for years. Does that diminish the impact of seeing the car for the first time? It does not, though these images – surreal to the point of distraction and far from flattering – do it no favours. Confident and beautifully resolved in places, particularly the shapely tail and exaggerated yet sleek rear haunches, it is precisely the kind of statement Jaguar needed to make. Glover describes it as 'the jaw-dropping future of our original luxury brand', and drop jaws it will.

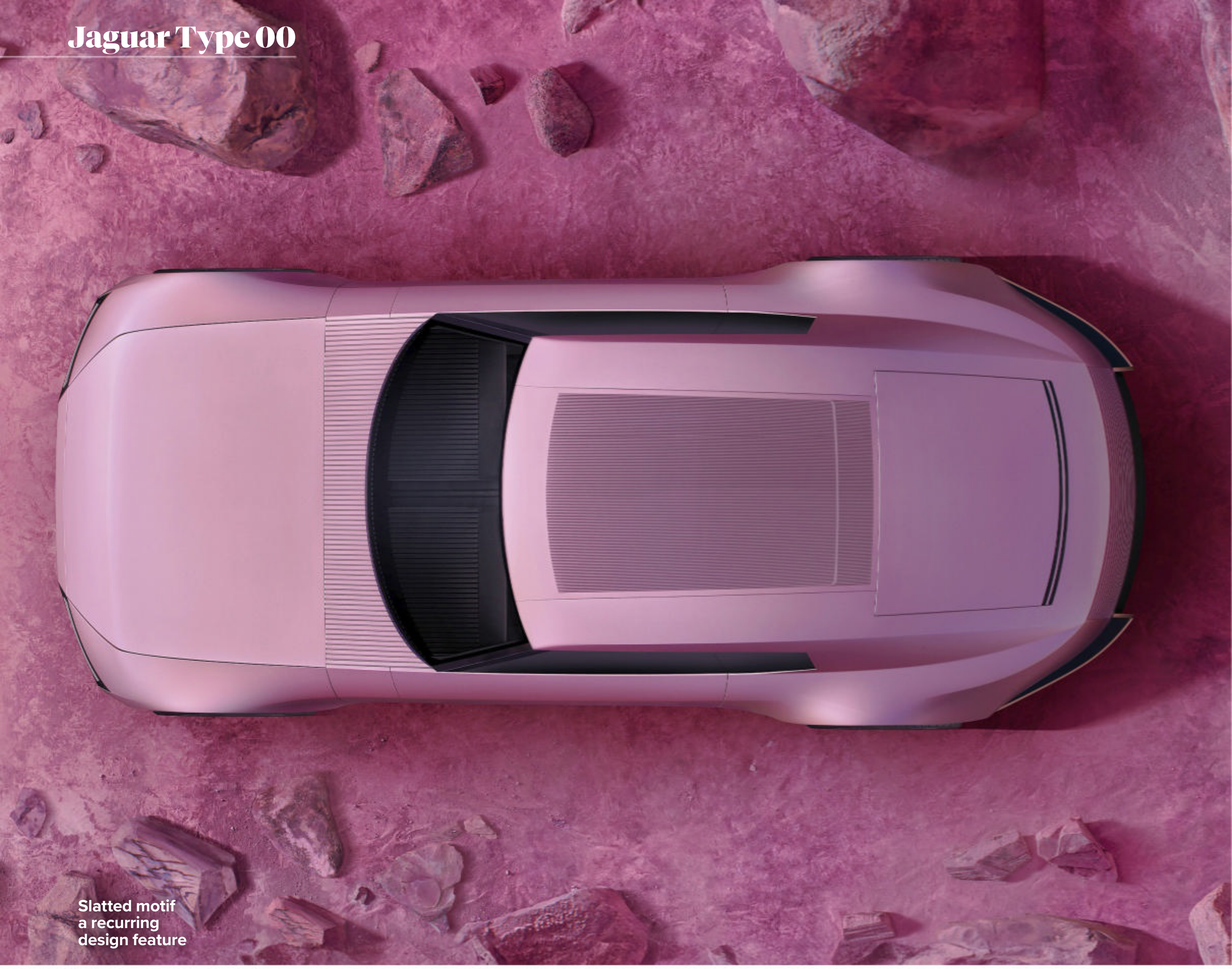
There are questions, of course, not least: why the vast bonnet when no engine will ever call it home? 'That's like asking someone why they just climbed a mountain: for the exhilaration of it,' counters McGovern. He also gives some steer as to which elements are likely to survive into production. 'The proportions are a key aspect of design code. This is not the car as a commodity; it's not about getting from A to B. It's a piece of art and exuberant as a coupe, just as the SUV will be exuberant as an SUV.'

How much of Type 00's impact will be lost in the translation from two-door concept to four-door production car?

'To answer that I'll go back to the very start,' says Glover. 'Gerry set the team up and it was a competitive process, to try to give this a real sense of edge and ambition. We didn't want to be conservative, so it was a disruptive process. And once we had our design language, then we then chose a platform for it – design has not been constrained by the platform. With virtually everybody else your platform defines your wheelbase, roof height and lots of other things. We haven't chosen that route. The challenge to our engineering colleagues was "that's the way we want the vehicle to look – now let's build that".

'Yes, let's make sure it drives like a Jaguar, let's make sure we can build it and let's make sure it's comfortable in the back. But their challenge has been to retain the design integrity, because that's the most important thing in terms of differentiation and getting that emotional reaction. The plan was never, "Let's not say anything for three years and then let's show something that looks completely different to what we're going to do." And we've got a good track record.' ▶

Spy shots of the production GT show very similar proportions



Slatted motif a recurring design feature

CHALLENGING ON ALL COUNTS

I get the design, even if I'm not sure that I love it yet. The task set for 'new' Jaguar's design team was to utterly divorce themselves from anything the marque has made in the past, and create something different to anything else on the road. A difficult dissociative task, given that they've made and we've looked at a lot of four-wheeled closed-cockpit conveyances over the past century and a bit… But they seem to have done it: certainly in Type 00's extraordinary monolithic surfacing.

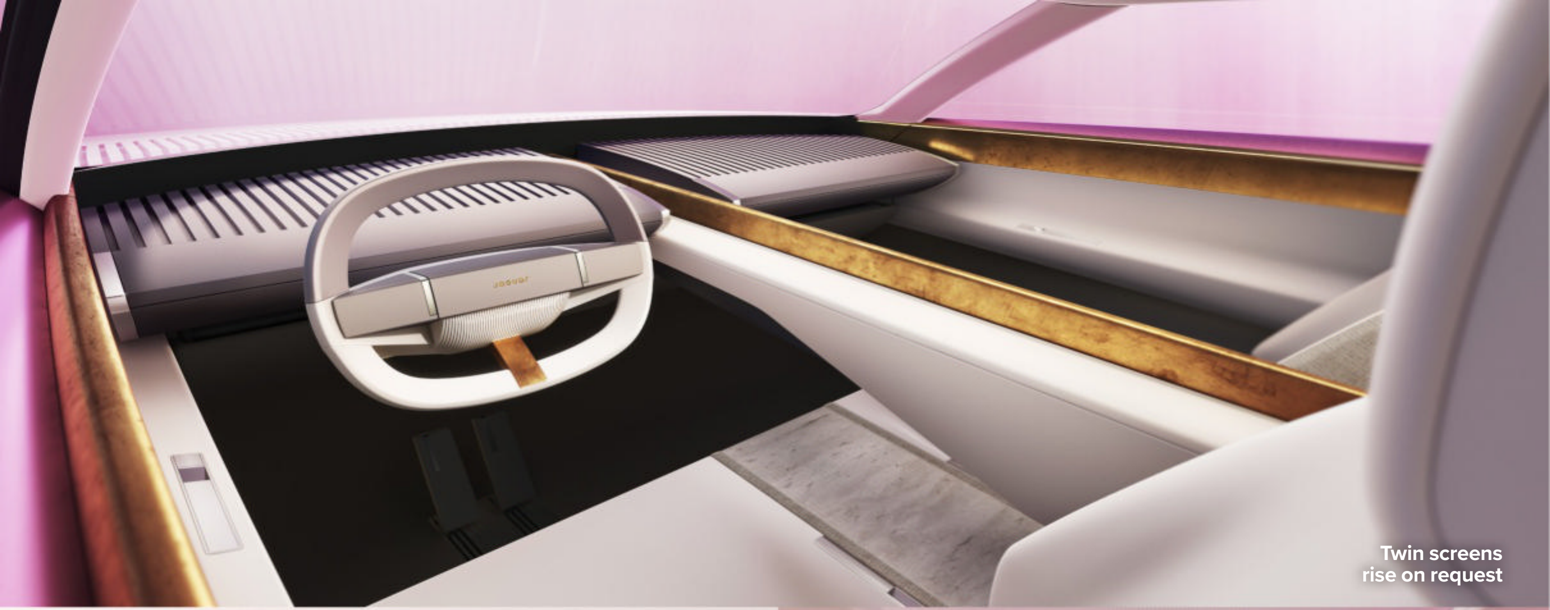
If its proportions have any precedent – that long hood, shallow glasshouse and fast screen angles – it's in the bespoke supercars of the '20s and '30s, like a Bugatti or a Gurney Nutting-bodied Bentley. That look is old enough to be new again.

What I don't get, yet, is the business case. CEO Adrian Mardell tells us he can't imagine a successful JLR without Jaguar. Yet that's exactly what he has now, with the LR making £1.1bn in the last six months but the J contributing essentially nothing. When only the name is carried over from old Jaguar to new, and when old Jaguar couldn't sell combustion cars to a more traditional demographic, and when luxury EVs remain a very hard sell, why take the risk?

Might it have been kinder to admit that Jaguar's race was run, and let it slip gracefully into abeyance?

There's been one delay already and there might be more: I hope that by the time the production cars appear the market will have turned, and we'll understand both the design and the why.

BEN OLIVER



Twin screens rise on request

Like they said, all new

It'll be a hell of a thing to see on the street, streaking down Park Lane on a wet winter's night, perhaps

For all the clean-sheet talk, Type 00 inarguably draws inspiration from some decadent eras in car design history, some of them 100 years old. There's more than an echo of the Bugatti Royale in the statement bonnet; shades of Bentley Speed Six in the silhouette and side window graphic. Flattering references, undoubtedly, and if the production GT can retain the lion's share of Type 00's impact then it'll be a hell of a thing to see on the street, streaking down Park Lane on a wet winter's night, perhaps, or bathed in late-afternoon light high in the Alpes-Maritime. For a machine with no fuel-fired heart and the frontal aspect of a freight train, there is romance here.

Let's dig into the detail, ever conscious that much will inevitably go missing between now and first deliveries. The concept features storage bays just aft of the front wheels, here holding a bizarre little box comprising trinkets in the car's signature materials, including brass, alabaster and travertine. These 'totems' work as a desirable physical ornament outside the car and, once inside, a blue-sky extrapolation of the idea of themed interior lighting and ambience, the car's 'mood' shifting as you drop a new totem into position. The concept will likely survive, and Jaguar's not ruling out the idea of extensive storage within that large (and largely empty) snout.

Inside, the cockpit's central dividing rail isn't a practical production possibility. But an exquisitely minimalist space is a given, with any luck complete with the concept's twin screens that rise when prompted and disappear when you crave digital detox. It's another take on the same thinking that gave us the Bentley Continental GT's rotating display and the McLaren 720S's 'show me only the basics' track mode. On the outside, 23-inch wheels can't be ruled out (17s certainly won't work…) and neither can production versions of Type 00's ruthlessly simple light signatures. Up front, the four slim horizontal slits of light, two high and two low, have Jaguar's designers very excited, both for their ability to make the car appear even lower and wider than it is and because they look absolutely nothing like anything else (and particularly no previous Jaguar). The stark surfaces, paper-cut intersections and breathtaking lack of clutter? All production feasible, and key to the integrity of the design.

JLR insists it's in this for the long haul; that the Jaguar plan (with more cars, including the inevitable SUV, on the same JEA architecture) is sufficiently robust and far-reaching to survive short-term blips in EV demand. But the plan pre-supposes that its cars are desired. First impressions, infamously, must be got right first time, even – particularly? – when you're a 90-year-old brand. For this to work the world must fall in love with Type 00. Over to you, world. **car**

COMETH THE POWER

Nearly 30 years a Porsche man, Frank-Steffen Walliser – fluent in future platforms and plugged into the VW Group's decision-making apparatus – is now steering Bentley

Words Ben Miller **Photography** Bentley Motors & Olgun Kordal

Behind us, the picture-perfect Swiss mountain resort we left five minutes ago free-falls into our recent past, the not inconsiderable speed with which we sweep around each hairpin taking us further from Andermatt and closer to the heavens. Ahead, the sashaying mountain road – smooth, empty, dry and set in a landscape so dizzyingly vast and beautiful I'm not sure whether to laugh or cry – is doing a decent impression of perfection. And next to me, suede-rimmed wheel in his hands, accelerator pedal very much under his right foot, new-ish Bentley CEO Frank-Steffen Walliser is talking, chuckling, driving and trying (but mostly failing) to summon some suitably sombre tone as we discuss the demise of Bentley's W12 engine. (We're in the new Continental GT Speed, which has filled the W12-shaped vacuum in its nose with a V8 plug-in hybrid set-up of significant potency.)

'Looking at the competitors, yes, they made different decisions, saying they are going to stay [with their flagship engines; Aston Martin has heavily revised its twin-turbo V12 for the new Vanquish, and Ferrari and Lamborghini will retain their V12s for the foreseeable]. But driving our alternative is extremely good.'

It's at this point, perhaps for emphasis, Frank flexes his ankle, filling the cosy cabin with sumptuous V8 racket and firing the Conti up the road like a wet bar of soap squeezed with both hands. 'I have a W12 company car, a [previous-generation] Continental GT,' he continues. 'The engine is nice, it's unique and it's amazing from a technical perspective. Do I miss it? Yes, for the heritage and the engineering. But on the road, this is perfect.'

Head pinned to the headrest, it's hard to argue. Next question.

I've long been curious and, well, I'm 99 per cent sure this is *the* moment: that I'll never get a better chance than right now to try to understand the inner workings of the labyrinthine VW Group (custodians of the Bentley brand since 1998). Specifically, how does it decide which of its tech- and investment-hungry brands gets the really good stuff. Is it like *Dragons' Den*, perhaps? Brand bosses and CTOs shuffling in, nervously making their case and, on a good day, leaving with three-chamber air suspension? Or is it more *Gladiator*: a secret Colosseum somewhere in Wolfsburg from which the victor emerges, bloodied but clutching an electronic limited-slip diff?

'Ah, now, this is maybe one of the secrets of the Volkswagen Group – and if I'm being honest, I'm still looking for the answer.' Frank's being coy, of course. This is the man behind Porsche's remarkable 918 Spyder, a car that conquered so much fresh technical territory it must have run out of flags to plant. His CV also includes the mid-engined 911 RSR racecar and the new 'T-Hybrid' GTS 911. If anyone knows how to get the good stuff it's Frank.

This is the man behind the 918 Spyder, a car that conquered so much fresh territory it must have run out of flags to plant

'Part of the answer is definitely your network; the people you know. There's no general decision board saying, "Right, this technology goes there, this goes here..." If you have a trustful relationship and know where the decisions are made you can look into the cycle plans, you know the guys, and you can figure out what you can take.

'But then you have to be open-minded because in engineering, when you see an early prototype, honestly the experience is normally not good. It's still being developed and refined. So you have to judge, "Okay, would this fit our car?" And if you're not convinced, you have to think, "Is it the state of the R&D that is not convincing or is it the technology itself?" It certainly won't be right for Bentley at that stage. You must look at the potential.'

There it is, then: proof, were it needed, that networks are as vitally important within the Byzantine VW Group as they are without it. And when Frank explains the transformative couple of months that plucked him from Porsche and shifted him to Crewe, you get the sense his network is formidable.

'Everything was at short notice,' he insists. 'I'd had some general talks before about what the future might look like. After working for some years, as I have, you have some connections in the Group. You exchange ideas and talk to people, and I'd already driven some Bentley vehicles in my previous role [vice president complete vehicle architecture and characteristics at Porsche].

'At the end of March I got the call, asking if I would be interested. I spoke to my wife, we got on a plane and we drove around a bit in a rental car, everything undercover. We made the decision on our side, and then for sure you have to go through the Group. But I've had a very good connection with [VW Group CEO and Porsche CEO] Oliver Blume for many years, so that was not the question. He was in favour. And the driving force behind it was Gernot Döllner at Audi. He is also a long-time friend – we started at the same time, and we've always been close. On the 918 he did the technical concept and the show car, then handed it over to me. We sometimes discuss which was the more difficult part...' ▶

Fancy some mountain air? New Speed slaughters long, steep slopes

New Speed an irresistible implementation of the PHEV formula

It's promised the first EV, a 'luxury urban SUV' due 2026, will offer a level of agility beyond the current range

Frank's first day as CEO and chairman of Bentley was 1 July. And what a time to join. The full extent of Volkswagen's financial pain is global news and it is eye-watering. Audi, too, finds itself in the teeth of a storm. Electrification, not long ago a bandwagon at which everyone was launching themselves, appears now to be a particularly nasty combination of brutally expensive investment and limited return, certainly in the short term. And all the while shifting, wildly inconsistent global legislation adds yet another layer of hideous complication. Is this the time to be putting a guy with no prior CEO experience in charge of Bentley?

'If you look at the job I did on the 918 Spyder, it was really more than one job. I was also looking after the complete vehicle: purchasing, production, customer relation, sales, marketing efforts. It was not only the engineering. And that was really exciting. Yes, there was complexity. But it was a lot of fun making the decisions to deliver the car to customers. It was everything right up until the moment when you hand over the key to the customer, saying, "Now it's finished, and you can drive it." It's an unbelievable thrill, and really you have to keep this moment always in mind during a project – the original concept of the car and that moment when you will hand over the key and say, "What do you think?"

'It's the same when I ran the Porsche motorsport department [between 2014 and 2019]. We had the racing team but we were also responsible for all the road-legal GT cars [Frank owns a 991-generation 911 GT3 Touring], engineering, motorsports for the customer racing, sales, marketing, the Carrera Cups… I always considered this a small company inside the company, and this was how we ran it.

'For me Bentley is kind of an extension of this, and what really thrills me the most is having this mixture of technical stuff but also marketing, the brand, communication, customer contacts, production, aftersales – the full picture. How many car brands are there in the world? And how often do you get the chance to run one? Obviously Bentley is not mine. But that sense of responsibility really appealed to me; it really excites me.'

The current line-up, which includes the Conti GT 2+2 coupe and convertible, the Flying Spur and two Bentayga variants, excites him too, not least because of the potential still to be tapped.

'The current offering is very strong. I think in many ways, from a driving perspective the Bentayga is underrated. I just drove it again recently on the roads of north Wales, with some of the competitors, and it is very, very good. But while I understand the background and why certain decisions were made – and I definitely do not blame anyone – the last update of the car [which arrived in 2020, and comprised detail changes to the suspension and cockpit, together with an exterior refresh which didn't look as extensive as it was] did not push it as far as it could have done.'

You sense Bentley's failure to capitalise on the rapidly expanding luxury SUV market quite as hard as it might bothers Frank.

'Definitely there is more potential in the SUV. The Bentayga kind of defined this segment [we'd had sporty, premium SUVs before, but the Bentley blazed a trail for the likes of the DBX, the Cullinan, the Urus and the Purosangue], as the Continental GT did before it. The segment is growing tremendously and we have not benefitted from that as much as we could have done, for different reasons.'

The first EV should help, now confirmed as a 'luxury urban SUV', due 2026. Bentley claims the new car, which won't replace any of the brand's existing models but complement them, is the first 'true luxury urban SUV' – though precisely what will make it more urban than any other luxury electric SUV remains to be seen. An uplift in comfort is promised, together with a level of agility beyond the current plug-in hybrid and combustion-engined line-up.

'It will be a little bit more compact – for a Bentley I must add. So under five metres in length [the Porsche Macan is 4.7; the Bentayga 5.1-5.3] and easier to drive in urban areas,' he explains. 'It will be super-versatile and you will be able to use it for both long range and for the city. We want to attract new customers – there is not a lot of electric demand among today's Bentley customers – and we think this vehicle will help us do this. Optimising travel time is not just about range. We will have incredible fast charging and the range will fit all the needs of our customers.' ▶

THE CARS THAT MADE HIM

Porsche 911 SC

'I was interested in all things technical as a child, and I remember a lady where we lived had a 911 SC. I would cross the street every day to look at that car – it fascinated me. I was so disappointed when she sold it and bought a grey Mercedes 190E… That helped make my mind up, so I went to technical school at 16, then mechanical engineering at the University of Stuttgart, two years in the army, and then an internship at Porsche. That was more than 29 years ago.'

Porsche 918 Spyder

'The engineering challenge was tremendous. We did everything in 38 months. Everybody was saying it was impossible. I said we could do it only if we made decisions and we didn't fool around – a motorsport attitude. We had to persuade thousands of colleagues to adopt this very different working style. The hybrid software challenge we solved. Honestly it more the hardware, because with the brutal force [of the powertrain's combined torque] everything kept breaking. The level of technology was really high. In the engine, the maximum wall thickness was 3mm, for weight – 138kg for a 4.6-litre V8 is still very good.'

The new car is part of a prudent re-engineering of Bentley's initially hyper-aggressive electrification timeline. The original plan, announced in January 2022, was to launch five EVs between 2025 and 2030 – the so-called 'Five-in-Five plan' – in an ambitious £2.5bn push to establish Bentley as a leader in sustainable luxury. The brand's 'all-electric by 2030' intention has also been revised, to 2035. We'll see a new model every year between 2026 and 2035 but the rollout will comprise PHEVs as well as EVs. Bentley's also not done with purely combustion-engined cars, hinting at a hot Bentayga in 2025.

'The first electric Bentley will be 2026, on sale 2027,' confirms Frank. 'This is the part of the strategy we have been concentrating on since I arrived. Things could still change. We have five-year cycles, and when you look back five years from now, to 2019, pre-Covid, the picture was completely different.'

As is consistently the case at the moment it's weak customer demand that's prompted Crewe's re-think, rather than any serious technical, production or financial challenge.

'You can only sell it if your customer is convinced; you cannot push it. For sure it also depends a lot on the regulators, the political and tax boundary conditions. But the luxury car it is not something you buy to go from A to B. They are outside of tax optimisation, and realistically you cannot ask for a tax reduction on luxury cars. So, this is a real market. It is not driven from the outside. I would say what we're seeing in the [electric] market at the moment is a dip. Electric demand will come back, at different speeds in different categories and in different countries, and we will be prepared for that. When we arrive with our first BEV in 2026/2027 it will coincide with a second wave of customer acceptance.'

Just as Frank's spider's web of a network stands Bentley in good stead for the coming years, so too will his familiarity with the platforms around which it will create its next decade of new models. The urban SUV will ride on an advanced version of the PPE platform already in use in/underneath Porsche's electric Macan and Audi's Q6 e-Tron and new A6. Put it to him that the prospect of a Bentley that feels and drives like any of the above doesn't feel right and he smiles a weary smile.

'The question is always, "What is the platform?", but really there are so many variants, and this makes sense when you have the requirements of many different brands. Software has a huge impact.'

Put it to him that the prospect of a Bentley that drives like an A6 e-Tron doesn't feel right and he smiles a weary smile

Has Crewe been influencing the design of PPE for years?

'It's more like "What can we take?" We can do whatever we want; whatever is appropriate for the brand. We just need a platform that gives us a good base on battery power, charging speed, the electrical architecture and software.

'This is where I think sometimes Bentley is misjudged. It is also a technology company – we're handling all this stuff. It's not only stitching and leather and nice interiors, and I haven't seen many [other luxury car companies] in the world capable of doing this to this level. Honestly, no one. It is not just a carry-over platform. The engineering job is way bigger – to bring a Bentley-ness to every part of the platform, even where you cannot see it. This is very important, so that we are unique.'

Will Frank's Bentleys feel different to drive? After all, you'll find his fingerprints on many of the most celebrated Porsche sports cars of the last 20 years. There's also something of a contradiction at the heart of the brand, isn't there? On one hand Bentley has a racing heritage – the Bentley boys, Le Mans, Pikes Peak, GT3 – and, on the new Speed, very Porsche-esque tech such as rear-wheel steering and electronic differentials. But you sense too that an awful lot of Bentley customers just want a quiet, comfortable and luxurious motor car…

'This is an interesting point, and one I'm discussing with the engineering team more or less every day. I would say comfort is too generic. Effortless is a word that describes it way better, so the car is easy to handle. You notice this effortlessness too when you drive the heritage cars. I'm convinced that if a car is really driving properly, with top steering feel, throttle response and great brake-pedal feel, this is all part of effortless, regardless of how you drive. I also don't believe that to be comfortable you have to be soft. A car that is soggy is not good to drive because it demands more of your attention. It's a like a good racecar. A car is usually fastest, certainly in terms of repeatable performance, when it is the easiest to drive, because the driver is less distracted and more confident.'

Talking of racecars… 'Do we have motorsport plans? No, not at the moment. Would racing again fit with the Bentley brand? Absolutely yes. In terms of the World Endurance Championship it would help if they could agree a single set of regulations… [LMDh – Porsche, Lamborghini, BMW – and the more open, more expensive LMH]. But right now it is not a top priority. It is the same with a Bentley sports car. I would like to do it but it is not the priority. We also have to work out what exactly it might be.'

For now, the sports cars and racing success with which Frank forged his reputation must take a back seat. It's as a strategist, engineer and networking powerhouse Bentley needs him to shine.

The secret to happiness? More watches

THE FUTURE?

Tesla's Model Y arrived like a family-friendly gift from a sci-fi utopia. But the old-timers at Renault and Ford aren't content to let Elon Musk have it all his own way

Words Alan Taylor-Jones **Photography** Alex Tapley

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THAT OLD THING?

EXPLORER
Ford
AF24 YAK
Ford Motor Company Ltd

Model Y's huge sales make it the key target

This has not started well. I've barely left the car park in the Tesla Model Y and already it's annoyed me. The steering feels artificial, overly fast and heavy. The low-speed ride is unresolved, failing to cope with even modest speed bumps. I've driven Model Ys before, but this is my first time in the new Long Range Rear-Wheel Drive, and it just doesn't feel good.

But as we've found before, you do find yourself adapting and getting used to its sub-optimal chassis set-up. And of course there are plenty of other reasons to like the Model Y, as its several million buyers have found in the four years since it arrived. It's keenly priced, practical, efficient, fast, and has the best public charging network currently available.

The range has never been bad, but even so, Tesla's never-ending quest for improvement has led it to introduce this Long Range Rear-Wheel Drive version as both the entry point to the range and its most distance-friendly option.

The huge-selling Tesla has fresh competition all the time, and this duo look set to give it a good contest. The new electric-only Ford Explorer is a far cry from the last Explorer sold in the UK, a 4.0-litre V6-powered SUV that went off sale back in 2001. This new bearer of the badge, based on the VW ID. 4, is more than a foot shorter than the last Explorer, but manages to weigh 20kg more, because that's what happens when you swap a combustion powertrain for electric.

It's loosely SUV-shaped, and all-wheel drive is available, but in order to make it as directly comparable as possible with the Tesla we've selected a rear-wheel-drive Extended Range version.

They're up against the Renault Scenic E-Tech, an SUV that's already won a *CAR* group test against the talented Skoda Enyaq and underwhelming Peugeot E-3008. Once again, we've gone for the longest-range version and, like the Ford, it's in the top trim level. Even so, it's the cheapest SUV here whether you're buying outright or financing. Renault really is on a roll when it comes to EVs.

Like the Explorer, the Scenic resurrects a name from its manufacturer's back catalogue; in this case, the popular and long-running MPV. Neither naming choice has caused much of a stir, certainly compared to the brouhaha triggered by Ford's use of the Capri name for another VW-based EV, essentially a slightly lower Explorer. Either way, we're testing the cars, not their makers' naming strategies, any more than we're assessing the Model Y based on the Tesla boss's dubious political utterances.

After a couple of days with the Y, I've got used to it, more or less. It's still not as good as you'd hope around town, but at higher speeds the steering feels more appropriate, and the ride smooths out significantly, too. It's still on the firm side, but on the open road the jarring fidgetiness that plagues it around town becomes nothing more troublesome than tight damping, while the stiff springs keep the body pleasingly upright. Chuck it into a corner and it hangs on gamely, the stability control working overtime to successfully prevent tyres slipping under acceleration or hard cornering forces.

Helped by acceleration that's far beyond what's necessary in a family SUV, you can cross country at a fair old lick, albeit with little in the way of fun or involvement. It's only fair to say that some colleagues found the steering's speed fine, although even after several days I still reckoned it was too fast and nervous just off-centre, and lacking in a sense of connection to the front tyres.

Time to swap into the Ford. I'm assuming that the Explorer will steer and ride better than the Model Y, based on fond memories of various past and current cars wearing the blue oval. The Mk1 Ford Focus, dearly departed Fiesta ST and even the surprisingly entertaining current Ford Kuga all suggest the Explorer should rise above the soggy ID. 4 and indeed the softly sprung Enyaq, which also shares much with the VW. ▶

IN FAMILY CARS LIKE THIS, CONSIDERATIONS SUCH AS ROOMINESS CARRY A LOT OF WEIGHT

Model Y now facing some stiff opposition

Love it or hate it, you can't miss it

Neater than most Ford interiors, but that's faint praise

THE EXPLORER ISN'T QUITE SO BUTTON-LIGHT AS THE MODEL Y, BUT IT'S NOT FAR OFF

It's certainly firmer than the ID. 4. However, unlike the unrelentingly stiff Tesla, there's a consistency to the ride and a quality to the damping. Furthermore, the Ford steers with precision and predictability and gives its driver a better indication of what the front tyres are doing. There's perhaps a little more lean and maybe not quite as much grip, but the Explorer is the more entertaining and engaging SUV to drive. Flick the stability control into its Sport setting and you can even steer the car on the throttle a little, although anything that results in opposite lock soon gets shut down.

You do ultimately feel the Explorer's weight when you're getting a wriggle on, but it's not enough to stop you having fun. The brakes let the side down, though. The Model Y has the most natural-feeling stoppers on test compared to the Ford's clearer separation between regenerative and friction braking.

With two contenders going for the stiff 'n' sporty approach, I'm pleased to find the Scenic offers an alternative. Like the Explorer it's on 20-inch wheels (while the Model Y wears 19s, making its poor ride quality all the more surprising) but the Scenic is a more supple, laid-back option. Its springs are noticeably softer than the other cars here, allowing the Scenic, for the most part, to soak up punishing road surfaces much better.

The trade-off for soft ride is that it doesn't feel quite as well tied down, and there's certainly the most bodyroll of our group. That said, it doesn't disgrace itself in the bends, and feels the best suited for family duties. The steering is quite lively, the nose feeling keen to dive into a bend. A lift of the throttle on the way in tightens your line in a pleasing manner, and there's enough pace to just about keep you interested. Remember, the Scenic's 7.9sec 0-62mph time is pretty much the same as a Renault 5 GT Turbo, which in fond memory is one of the wildest of hot hatches. Times change.

So far, then, the Explorer stands out as the fun choice, the Scenic is ahead on comfort and general pleasantness, and if you've got a Model Y it's because you didn't bother with a test drive.

But of course when a car is primarily for family transport, driving pleasure is not the deciding factor. Practical considerations such as roominess carry a lot of weight. The Model Y has the biggest cargo area here by some margin. (A third row of seats will soon be available in the UK, something the Renault and Ford do not offer.) You also get a boot up front that's big enough for a carry-on suitcase all by itself.

Although the Explorer shares its wheelbase with the ID. 4, it's shorter overall because of its truncated tail. The Scenic sits somewhere in the middle in terms of capacity, if not convenience. For a start the boot opening is much higher, creating a big loading lip to hump your bags and boxes over. You then notice the load area isn't anywhere near as long as those in the other cars here. Instead, the capacity comes from height, with a deep well in the floor.

As well as minimal loading lips, the Ford and Tesla have rather laughable parcel shelves. The Explorer's is a flimsy bit of fabric that at least rises with the bootlid. The Tesla's needs manually moving.

Both the Model Y and Scenic come with useful 40/20/40 folding rear seats, while the Scenic goes a step further in offering a two-level boot floor. The Explorer makes do with a more common 60/40 split, albeit with a useful load-through hatch.

Lingering traces of VW controls

Aero inserts subtly built into the Scenic's wheels

EXPLORER
Ford

Explorer shares only a name with US SUV

For rear passenger space, the Scenic wins by some margin, offering legroom that feels like it's from the class above. Headroom is also good, helped by the panoramic roof that's able to turn opaque, negating the need for a space-sapping roof blind. A flat floor helps when you have three in the back, although a bit more room under the front seats would be welcomed by rear passengers with big shoes.

Special mention should also go to the Scenic's cunning rear armrest. Not only does it hide two C-USB ports (as well as the two between the front seats) there are also two cupholders, a shallow lidded cubby and clever rotating smartphone cradles. These allow a ▶

Tidy rear helped by Ford giving it a small boot

THE SCENIC'S REAR PASSENGER LEGROOM FEELS LIKE IT'S FROM THE CLASS ABOVE

couple of passengers to watch their different favourite shows in peace, or you can swing them around to create a cradle for an iPad or other tablet. Anything that can stop siblings squabbling or prevent back-seat boredom is worthy of celebration in my book.

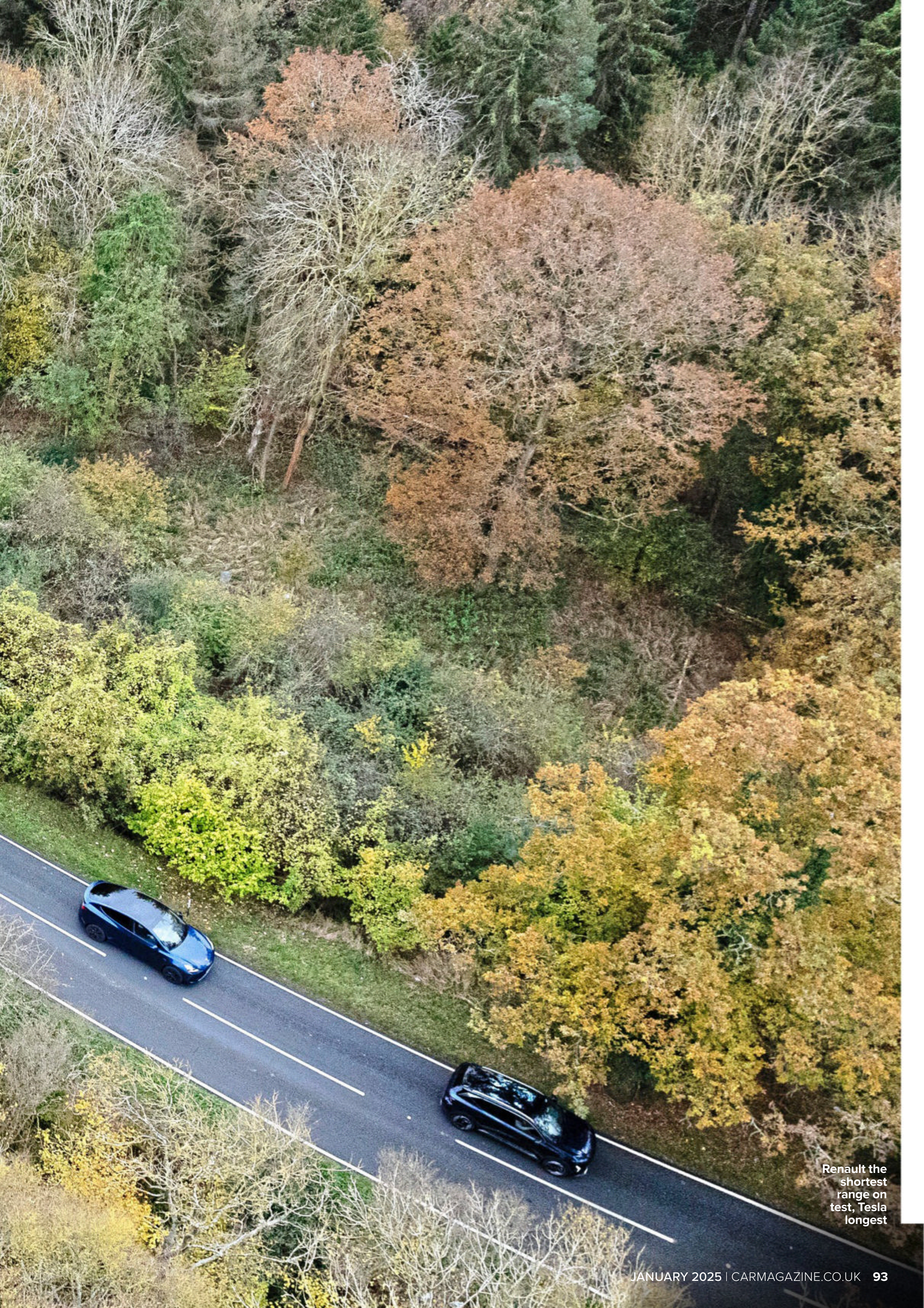
It's the Model Y that feels next most spacious, exaggerated by the light coming in from the big windows and this car's vast panoramic roof. A 6ft 2in adult, sitting behind similarly tall front-seat occupants, has enough space in the Ford and Tesla, just not quite as much as in the Scenic.

Up front, all three provide lots of headroom, and in every case the driver's seat goes back far enough for long legs, and close enough to the pedals for those best described as fun-sized.

Interior quality hasn't been a Ford strong point of late, with both the recently facelifted Kuga and Puma feeling well off the pace. The Explorer is certainly better than them, but is outshone by the Scenic and Model Y. I like the Ford's soft-touch, light-coloured plastics, and what little switchgear there is feels decent. It's a shame that the movable infotainment screen doesn't feel built to last and looks a bit basic.

The Tesla has quite a variety of squishy plastics and metal-effect trims, while its digital display is undoubtedly the crispest and most responsive, if not the easiest to navigate for me. It also offered an array of squeaks and rattles, and aspects of the layout just don't work for me. Having no display in front of you to show your speed is at best annoying, and there's just too much going on in the infotainment system, including the heating and mirror adjustments.

The Explorer isn't quite so button-light as the Model Y, but it's not far off. The Scenic's interior is not perfect – a lot of hard plastic – but it's so much more user-friendly than the others. Little touches like the fabric-wrapped dash and pixel-effect wood trim provide a modern yet welcoming ambience, and plush materials are used in the areas you touch regularly. It also has actual buttons to control the ▶



Renault the shortest range on test, Tesla longest

No engine, so no traditional grille for any of these

Renault leads on comfort, Ford on handling

THE SCENIC'S PRICE SAVING IS A SIGNIFICANT GAP, AND IT OPENS EVEN WIDER IF YOU GO PCP

Scenic's screen is big and easy to use

It's family-friendly like the old Scenic

No, not an Alpine – a Renault in Esprit Alpine spec

heating and various other functions, including one to turn off any unwanted driver assists with just a couple of button pushes.

Some of my younger colleagues have dared suggest Renault might have taken this emphasis on physical controls a bit too far. There are four stalks jutting out of the steering column: conventional light and wiper controls, another for selecting drive and reverse, and a fourth for the audio controls – a decades-old French tradition.

It sounds like a mess when you describe it, and I guarantee you'll accidentally turn the wipers on when you're looking for reverse several times, but you quickly get used to them. It's the same story with the heater controls – adjusting the temperature or fan speed without looking is easy.

On balance, the Scenic has the best infotainment system here, too. It's not information overload like the Tesla and looks less like PowerPoint than the Ford's. Instead, it's responsive, looks good and, unlike the Tesla, has both Android Auto and Apple CarPlay baked in.

Our efficiency testing was carried out on our usual loop, taking in a bit of suburban Peterborough, some 60mph-limit B-roads punctuated by 30mph zones, and a stint on the A1(M). It's a tougher ordeal than you'll get from WLTP, and led to some interesting results.

In last place for efficiency is the Renault Scenic, managing a mere 3.3 miles per kWh. With its 87kWh battery, that's enough for a real-world range of 287 miles, nearly 90 short of the official figures. Our experience thus far with the Scenic suggests it's much happier away from the motorway, and will top 300 miles fairly easily.

Slightly better is the Explorer at 3.6 miles per kWh, against an official figure of 4.2. The 77kWh battery gives a range of 325 miles.

On the same route, on the same day, driving in convoy with my colleagues while occasionally swapping drivers and even positions on the road for fairness, the Model Y didn't just match its official figure of 4.0 miles per kWh, it bettered it at 4.1. That's enough to take the range from an official 373 miles up to a hefty 381.

Not only can you go farther with a Tesla, you can charge it faster too on a visit to the excellent Supercharger network; it'll charge at up to 250kW. Tesla claims you can add up to 150 miles of range in just 15 minutes, or get from 10 to 80 per cent full in around 25 minutes, assuming the battery is at the right charge level and temperature. You're looking at over 12 hours to get from empty to full using a typical 7.4kW home wallbox.

The Explorer can't charge anywhere near as quickly, and you're at the mercy of the wider public charging network. Its maximum charging rate is a relatively low 135kW, but the modest size of the battery means it'll take less than 30 minutes to get from 10 to 80 per cent charged on a punchy enough rapid charger. If you're using a 7.4kW home wallbox, you're again looking at over 12 hours of charging.

The Scenic has a 150kW maximum rapid charging rate but a relatively big battery. That means it takes a yawning 37 minutes to get from 15 to 80 per cent full. Stick it on your 7.4kW wallbox and that time increases to very nearly 13 hours. Alternatively, you can benefit from 11kW charging; both the Tesla and Renault can take up to 22kW on a three-phase Type 2 plug.

Price will be a big factor for most family-focused buyers. The Explorer can be had for about £40,000, and that entry model has an even better range than this version, but a top-spec RWD is basically £50k to buy outright. That's a good £3k more than the Model Y, with the Scenic undercutting both.

A top-spec Scenic Iconic is less than £46k, and a Long Range version in entry-level but still well-equipped Techno trim is a fiver shy of £41k. That's a significant gap compared to today's two rivals, and it opens even wider if you delve into the murky world of finance. For example, a 48-month PCP with a £5000 customer deposit and a relatively high annual mileage limit of 12,000 gives you access, at the time of writing, to manufacturer-backed zero per cent APR schemes, although you'll need a five-figure deposit to get that from Renault. It's the Explorer that's priciest on PCP at £522 a month followed by the Model Y at £508 a month, while the Scenic is the only one to dip below £500 a month. ▶

FINAL RECKONING

TIME TO ADJUST YOUR EV EXPECTATIONS

There's a clear winner in this test, but third place is a much trickier call. In some ways it should be the Ford Explorer that finishes last. After all, it has the smallest boot and the least appealing interior, it could be more comfortable, and is the priciest by some margin. But then again it steers and rides like a true Ford should, despite the Volkswagen chassis fundamentals it's built on, and despite the weight. It's been so well set up, in accordance with Ford tradition, that it's always a pleasure to drive the Explorer.

The Tesla Model Y is far less user-friendly than the Ford, unless you're fully at ease with a cabin that puts almost all controls in the central touchscreen; some people take to it readily, while some take a while to get used to it, and others never get that far.

That's a big part of the reason the Model Y takes an unfamiliar third place. The other is that it just isn't good enough to drive, especially at low speeds. Sure, the throttle and brake response are top notch, but the steering and ride both feel unfinished. People often think of the Model Y as a taller Model 3, but the 3's generally fine handling has got lost in the transition.

Let's hope Tesla's next set of revisions sort this out, as the Model Y does so much right. Its efficiency is class-leading, as is the Supercharger network, but I would be annoyed with myself as a car enthusiast if I ended up with one on my driveway. That simply wouldn't be the case with the Explorer.

So, if the Explorer's polished driving dynamics are enough to give it second place, our winner has to be the Renault Scenic. Again. Our tested efficiency and calculated range are on the disappointing side, and there are quicker and sharper-handling alternatives. However, a range of around 300 miles is still good, and it has ride comfort on its side. Performance is more than sufficient, and it's so spacious for rear passengers.

There's also an awful lot to be said for having switches and stalks to control key functions rather than jamming everything inside of a touchscreen. Similarly, an easy-to-reach button that kills the electronic nagging is a most welcome thing on a brand new car.

And then there's the price. If the Renault was similar money to the Explorer and Model Y, we might be looking at a different winner. Because it undercuts them both, with some stonking finance deals, it becomes an easy win for the Renault. At least until that next Model Y upgrade comes out…

1st

RENAULT SCENIC

Comfortable, practical, user-friendly and charismatic family transport

★★★★☆

2nd

FORD EXPLORER

Ford makes a better VW, but let down by a small boot

★★★★☆

3rd

TESLA MODEL Y

Good in so many ways, but the ride and steering are poor and the interface infuriating

★★★☆☆

FORD EXPLORER

▶ What's the line-up?

The Explorer range starts from £39,875. Three powertrain options are available: 52kWh rear-wheel drive, 77kWh rear-wheel drive, and 79kWh all-wheel drive. AWD is fastest; 77kWh RWD best for range. Entry-level trim is Select, but we're testing Premium: the most expensive car here, but finance is very attractive.

▶ Data

Price £49,975 (RWD Extended Range Premium) **Powertrain** 77kWh battery, e-motor, rear-wheel drive **Performance** 282bhp, 402lb ft, 6.4sec 0-62mph, 112mph **Weight** 2102kg **Efficiency** 4.2 miles per kWh (claimed), 3.6 (tested), 354-mile range (claimed), 325 miles (tested) **Length/width/height** 4468/2063/1630mm **Boot capacity** 465 litres

RENAULT SCENIC

▶ What's the line-up?

The Scenic range starts from £37,495. There are two battery sizes and power outputs, and three trim levels. Entry-level Techno is the only Scenic available with the 60kWh battery pack and 168bhp motor. The 217bhp motor and 87kWh battery are standard on Esprit Alpine and Iconic. It's the most affordable of our trio.

▶ Data

Price £45,495 (Iconic) **Powertrain** 87kWh battery, e-motor, front-wheel drive **Performance** 217bhp, 221lb ft, 7.9sec 0-62mph, 105mph **Weight** 1860kg **Efficiency** 4.4 miles per kWh (official), 3.3 miles per kWh (tested), 379-mile range (claimed), 287 miles (tested) **Length/width/height** 4470/2085/1571mm **Boot capacity** 545 litres

TESLA MODEL Y

▶ What's the line-up?

The Model Y range starts from £46,990. On top of the Long Range Rear-Wheel Drive tested here, you can also get a Long Range All-Wheel Drive and a Performance. Our test car gets a 93kWh battery and 342bhp electric motor. It's the most expensive car here on PCP on the same terms as the other two.

▶ Data

Price £46,990 **Powertrain** 93kWh battery, e-motor, rear-wheel drive **Performance** 342bhp, 310lb ft, 5.7sec 0-62mph, 100mph **Weight** 1959kg **Efficiency** 4.0 miles per kWh (official), 4.1 miles per kWh (tested), 373-mile range (claimed), 381 miles (tested) **Length/width/height** 4751/1921/1624mm **Boot capacity** 854 litres

MASTER

S PE 4087
Mercedes-Benz Classic

AND COMMANDER

What makes the S-Class such an enduring phenomenon? And is it still as good as it was… or even better? We pit the classic 560 SEL against the hybrid S63 AMG

Words Georg Kacher **Photography** Steffen Jahn

Three-pointed star the only surviving hardware

Did I tell you about the time an S-Class was used as a luxurious getaway car when our holiday cottage was burgled while we were in the pool, completely unaware? Luckily they didn't take our towels.

We weren't the only victims of S-Class crime. During the launch of the facelifted W126, the personal 560 SEC of designer Bruno Sacco – dark blue with light blue trim – was stolen in the middle of the night by bandits who splashed the hotel forecourt with liquid soap before silently winching the coveted one-off into a boxed truck, never to be seen again.

For a car that's designed to be serene, rising above the concerns of the workaday world, it's had quite an eventful history. Look no further than the presentation of the W140 generation in Cannes, when controversial R&D chief Wolfgang Peter managed to back one into a tree. And that's even when early models were fitted with chromed pointers which extended on both sides of the rear wings in reverse gear to mark the big beast's extremities…

There's no denying its decades of excellence. But of all the big Merc saloons, which is the best, the most significant, the ultimate? I start my search by browsing through my collection of brochures, which includes S-Class models and spiritual predecessors dating back to 1954. After leafing through piles of material on a long, rainy weekend, the 1979-1991 W126 makes a very strong case. I'm also drawn to the 1972-on W116 that came immediately before it, but that was more about excess than style. It proudly wore daring colours, and the chrome content per square inch was second to none. Its awesome 6.9-litre engine arrived just in time for the energy crisis triggered by the Yom Kippur war of 1973.

Another close runner-up is 1991's W140, a mammoth slab-sided notchback, designed by Olivier Boulay. Like the rival BMW 7-series, it was available with a 12-cylinder engine. From today's vantage point it looks misguided, but at least it was distinctively, uniquely S-Class. The three generations that followed were in essence full-size metamorphoses of the E-Class: competent, comfortable and commendably efficient but visually me-too and conceptually less adventurous.

So it has to be the W126 that's the most S-Classy of past S-Classes. Of that generation, I have a soft spot for the striking SEC, but I seem to be in a minority in thinking the S-Class is best represented by a coupe; Mercedes hasn't made a two-door S-Class since 2019.

Of the saloons, the most desirable W126 is the 560 SEL – L for long-wheelbase – which adds 140mm to the regular 2850mm wheelbase for plenty of first-class rear legroom. So that's what we have here, paired with the most advanced, most powerful V8-engined W223, the current top-of-the-line AMG S63 E-Performance 4Matic (E-Performance signifying hybrid, 4Matic meaning all-wheel drive).

On paper, 295 against 802bhp doesn't look like a fair match, but this discrepancy is in line with developments across the automotive world in the course of the 34 years between the two test cars. At 5547cc, the older V8 easily wins the displacement duel against the newest 3982cc unit, yet in many other departments the 2024 model is ahead, often by a substantial margin. It's not just the powertrain: the chassis, cabin comfort, infotainment and safety have all improved in leaps and bounds.

The driver's door of the 560 opens and closes like a vault. But the power-operated memory seats, softly upholstered contourless steel-sprung chairs trimmed in heavy default velours, disappoint. True, they can be heated in two steps, and they have a vast adjustment range, with an orthopaedic function on top of the familiar lumbar support. And yet they're not a patch on the awesome omni-directional and multi-functional AMG neo-buckets, which manage to be both firm and comfortable. They come with more massage options than the week has days, they're ventilated, and they're stupendously versatile in terms of perfect body fit. Active g-force compensation may sound like a gimmick, but it works.

The W126 was available with two individual electrically operated seats in the back. An optional business pack featured phone and fax, and you could order extra reading lights as well as side curtains and remote-control rear roller blinds. But then you check out the S63. Its back seats have climatised multi-contour massage seats, neck and shoulder warmers, elaborate noise insulation, suede-trimmed headrest cushions, cupholders that keep your drinks cool or warm at ▶

More power, more tech, more weight

CEDES - BENZ
CLASSIC - CENTER

AMG versions shift the focus without shredding the character

AN OPTIONAL BUSINESS PACK FEATURED PHONE AND FAX, AND YOU COULD ORDER EXTRA READING LIGHTS AS WELL AS SIDE CURTAINS

More chips, yes. More grip, too. More comfortable? Also yes

your behest, bespoke tablets, multiple tray tables, USB ports and inductive charging stations, and electric footrests with soothing vibrations on demand. Compared to this sophisticated rear compartment, many a millionaire's mansion would look no better than merely adequate. No fax machine, mind.

Climbing behind the airbag-equipped wheel of the '90s S-Class is a journey back in time. Even though this was the maker's undisputed top-of-the-line product, the dashboard is a rather plain and very black plastic affair adorned with burr walnut accents which have lost some of their lustre. The centre console is busy with buttons, switches, a solitary toggle and a few thumbwheels, but the only harbingers of the pending digital age are a couple of rudimentary dot-matrix displays. The round instruments are analogue, the steering wheel non-adjustable, traction control has to be engaged manually, the Becker Mexico radio is very much of its time, and there are such olde worlde touches as the complex in-dash Webasto auxiliary heating panel and an extra-loud fast-lane horn.

The ergonomics are totally intuitive, once you've adapted to the need to manually adjust the driver's door mirror and the quite basic standard air-conditioning. Think of it as exemplary German functionality as opposed to Cadillac glamour or Rolls-Royce splendour.

Jump forward from 1990 to 2024, and brace yourself for a real culture shock – because this is another level of luxury, featuring the finest timber with thin alloy inlays and shiny piano-black contrasts, two different types of sumptuous glove leather with elaborate stitching and brave piping, ambient lighting options that would make the Moulin Rouge pale with envy, thick-pile carpets bordered with matching hide, sound-deadening sandwich glass, heated armrests and centre console, a full-length sunroof and a five-star surround-sound system.

That's the good news. The bad news starts with the pilot's licence you need if you're to master the screen-based controls, the four-spoke steering wheel crawling with cryptic haptic temptations and the trick digital content this cockpit has in store. There's distraction galore when the invasive driver-assistance systems busy the mind with buzzes, chimes, flashing warning lights and a helm that is prone to ▶

TO CUT A LONG STORY SHORT

The current S-Class is the tenth generation of its kind, but only the seventh to be labelled S-Class. That term arrived in 1972 with the model codenamed W116, which peaked as the mighty air-sprung 450 SE 6.9.

Next in line was the late Bruno Sacco's masterpiece, the beautifully proportioned W126, of which 818,036 were produced. Its replacement, the almost grotesquely ostentatious cathedral-size W140, found only 406,532 takers, making it the least successful post-war Merc flagship.

The W220 that followed (1998-2005), in essence a blown-up version of the marque's lesser saloons, went heavy on tech, bling and power, but the interior in particular marked an all-time low in terms of perceived quality. The evolutionary fifth-gen S-Class (W221, 2005-2013) had some marginally more economical Blue Efficiency models including the S250 CDI with a four-cylinder diesel. Although the W222 (2013-2020) shared the platform with its predecessor, it raised the bar for safety, comfort and convenience.

The W223 launched in 2020 is now expected to continue through to summer 2032, with facelifts still to come in 2026 and 2029.

No ambient lighting. No head-up display. Lots of plastic

vibrate in your palms. With the physical button count now reduced to the minimum, voice control could be a convenient way out, except it won't let you deactivate the main irritations, which return by default in full force every time the user hits the starter button again.

In 10 years' time, we may be looking back at the touchscreen age as a misguided fad promoted by over-eager bureaucrats and inventive suppliers, but right now the ergonomics of the S63 AMG are a clear case of less would be more. After all, it's not just the infotainment and the active safety faction that keep pestering the driver for decisions but also the fundamentals of the car. Suspension firm or even firmer? Which driving mode do you prefer – hybrid or, for a maximum of 20 miles, fully electric? It doesn't come as a surprise when I hear on very good authority that quite a few users leave most settings the way they were when they picked up the new car at the dealership.

Apart from dashboard riddles and control complexities, the 791bhp S63 is everything you want the top S-Class to be, and then some. One moment it's hush-quiet, but a quick stab at the throttle later it's transformed, the full-throated intake choir supported by two faint turbo fiddles meeting the heav- metal exhaust system.

It pulls out all the stops when asked to deliver. The 0-62mph exercise is a double-upshift 3.3sec roar, the 125mph mark flies by a thunderous 7.8sec later, and with the optional driver's pack the top speed soars from 155 to 181mph. That's seriously fast, but in this car velocity is an intriguing mix of splendid isolation and absolute involvement. It's not only the combined power unleashed by the 4.0-litre V8 and the e-motor which defines the character of the S63 but even more so the aggregate torque of 1055lb ft channelled through a fast-acting all-wheel-drive system that morphs from nicely balanced to brutally tail-happy in Sport+ with AMG Dynamics set in Pro.

Time to get back in the 560. It feels downright small compared to the current full-size long-wheelbase model, and at 1830kg it's also 765kg less portly. Even the lightest modern S-Class weighs 240kg more than the heaviest W126. Although it was a fast car in its day – 0-62mph in 6.9sec, 155mph maximum speed – the 295bhp engine with two valves per cylinder and no catalytic converter sounds strangely stressed when pushed, and in this head-to-head shootout it isn't all that smooth and quiet either. How come? While the torque curve of the 4.0-litre unit peaks at a leisurely 2500-4500rpm, the older 5.6-litre motor needs 3750rpm to produce 317lb ft.

THE 560 SEL FEELS DOWNRIGHT SMALL WHEN COMPARED TO TODAY'S FULL-SIZE LONG-WHEELBASE CAR

The comfort-orientated four-speed automatic offers two calibrations marked E and S. While E stands for Economic – achieved by means of frustratingly early upshifts – S denotes not Sport but Standard, which is a notably less lethargic setting but by no means wham-bang energetic. The catalytic converter was an ex-factory or retrofit option, but it reduced the output by 20bhp while increasing the consumption. At a nominal 20.7mpg, the 295bhp version was actually less thirsty than our tested figure for the plug-in hybrid S63, which averaged 18.6mpg, against an official 53.5mpg. In terms of boot volume, vintage beats modern by 305 against 505 litres – blame the 10.5kWh battery pack for this crass packaging disadvantage.

The rear-wheel-drive S-Class comes out tops in terms of ride quality at any speed and over any surface, since its modest 215/65 VR15 tyres have a clear compliance advantage over the wider and stiffer 21-inch Doc Martens fitted to Affalterbach's latest. But in all other dynamic departments, modern technology eclipses charming zeitgeist. The SEL's recirculating-ball steering is slow and vague by comparison, the directional stability at speed is approximate rather than accurate, and the turning circle cannot quite match the manoeuvrability of the more agile four-wheel-steer model. ▶

Nothing new about gimmicky tech: SEL has headlamp wipers

Autobahn is more the 560's element

S MA 631
S PE 4087

MERCEDES-BENZ 560 SEL (1990)

Price £62,000
Powertrain 5547cc 16v V8, four-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive
Performance 295bhp @ 5000rpm, 317lb ft @ 3750rpm, 6.9sec 0-62mph, 155mph
Weight 1830kg
Efficiency 20.7mpg, n/a g/km CO2
Value now £25,000-£40,000

MERCEDES-AMG S63

Price £188,820 (long wheelbase)
Powertrain 10.5kWh battery, 3982cc 32v V8 plus e-motor, PHEV, nine-speed-automatic, all-wheel drive
Performance 791bhp @ 5500rpm, 1055lb ft @ 2500rpm, 3.3sec 0-62mph, 155mph
Weight 2595kg
Efficiency 53.5mpg, 104g/km CO2
On sale Now

Both are happy to be driven all day, every day

THE S63 IS A REMARKABLY COMPLETE CAR, AND FOR THE MONEY ARGUABLY SUPERIOR TO THE FLYING SPUR AND GHOST

Time has also left its mark on the four petite ABS-equipped disc brakes, which are more interested in effortless modularity than in brutally efficient stopping power. In contrast, the carbon-ceramic rotors of the S63 will roll your cheeks forward in an emergency. There is no prize for predicting the winner in the grip, traction and road-holding sweepstakes either.

But… when we were about to head back to HQ, the flimsy plastic-capped ignition key of the 560 was in greater demand than the heavyweight multi-function fob that these days comes with every AMG effort. There's something about the older car, and it's not just novelty value.

While the S63 is in equal parts a four-door sports car, a four-seat GT, and an extrovert and powerful head-turner, the SEL comes across as an ageless and understated yet hugely competent luxury saloon. True, it cannot weigh in with all those drive modes, adaptive anti-roll bars, a superfast four-step energy-recuperation system and other trickeries. It isn't all that quick off the mark and through corners either, so don't for a minute mistake it for a wolf in sheep's clothing like the 500E co-engineered with, and built by, Stuttgart neighbours Porsche. But 30-plus years ago, this was the undisputed must-have Merc for the rich and famous, ideally in smoke silver or blue-black with the bumpers and flank protection panels sprayed in a complementary hue.

Together with the SEC coupe and the SL roadster, the SEL topped a remarkably coherent line-up which included the W201 baby Benz and the W124 pre-E-Class family. Although the 560 was the cherry on the S-Class cake, a similar feeling and flair are relayed by the six-cylinder models and by the lesser V8s badged 380, 420 and 500.

In Europe, S-Class, A8 and 7-series are no longer the must-have toys of city slickers and the landed gentry; the E-Class, A6/7 and 5-series are offering a similar space and status for notably less money, and without encountering mounting problems of social acceptance. When we toured the Stuttgart hinterland, the gunmetal car received plenty of thumbs-ups, whereas the silver starship was met with a mix of respect, uninterest and mild resentment.

There's no doubt the S63 is a remarkably complete car, probably even the ultimate high-performance luxury saloon, for the money arguably superior to the less cosseting Bentley Flying Spur and the ageing Rolls-Royce Ghost. But to qualify for absolute greatness, it needs the next-generation hybrid to at least triple the zero-emissions range as well as providing controls that are easier to use and less distracting. A bigger boot would be good.

For the price of one S63 AMG –which can easily reach £200k when you start adding options – you could buy a handful of pristine low-mileage 560 SELs, although most of them are likely to be left-hand drive. Good to excellent six-cylinder models typically go for between £20k and £30k; V8s fetch at least a £5k premium. What you get in exchange are high-quality, ultra-reliable time capsules that cost a lot less to buy and run than period Rolls-Royces or Bentleys and are more special than an Audi V8 or a second-edition 7-series. The W126's design has aged very well, as has its engineering. And, most importantly, the bulletproof hardware offers the prospect of plenty of fuss-free driving pleasure.

Hewn from solid and engineered to last, the 560 SEL is conservative in character, sublimely comfortable and well prepared for just about anything. The S63 AMG is a better all-rounder as well as an amazingly sophisticated piece of kit, but even as plug-in hybrid it moves the luxury car in a debatable direction – the weight, size and price all seem excessive.

Will it still be applauded 30-plus years from now? Time will tell, but leafing back through the past four decades, there was not a single AMG version – neither the supercharged S55 nor the V12-engined S65 – that could match the 560 SEL's magical appeal. **car**

Our cars

HELLO AUDI S3 + GOODBYE ABARTH 500E + LATEST ON OUR BMW, SKODA, ALFA, PEUGEOT, MINI, RENAULT & BYD

So far the paint is the star of the show

Lee Brimble

The centre can hold

Expensive A3? Budget RS3? Or sweet spot in the range? By **Curtis Moldrich**

Audi S3 Black Edition TFSI S-tronic

Month 1

The story so far

Best bits of the old RS3 in what should be a Goldilocks package

+ Understated looks; strong performance; great colour

- Is it interesting? Or not quite special enough?

Logbook

Price £47,490 (£51,135 as tested) **Performance** 1984cc turbocharged four-cylinder, 328bhp, 4.7sec 0-62mph, 155mph **Efficiency** 34.4mpg (official), n/a mpg (tested), 188g/km CO2 **Energy cost** n/a p per mile **Miles this month** 33 **Total miles** 159

Carefully manipulated to fit in the space left between the practical A3 and the all-out, full-fat RS3, the S3 has often been labelled with the automotive equivalent of middle-child syndrome. It's doomed to be too good to be an underdog like a nicely-spec'd A3, and clipped from birth to be one step behind the top-dog RS3.

That is until now, apparently. *CAR* has driven both the prototype and proper production versions of Audi's warm hatch, and my colleagues tell me this is finally an S3 with its own personality. Better yet, it's an S3 that offers engagement and feedback rather than numb, well-engineered performance.

Certainly my long-term test car gives every impression that it's trying to carve out a space in the Ingolstadt hierarchy. Audi Sport badges pop up with an almost parodic frequency and the rest of the car tries to look meaner than the A3 – without encroaching on RS3 territory.

It's an unenviable tightrope to walk, but I reckon the S3 comes out of it well: multiple badges aside, the new diffuser and other exotic bits of trim look more distinguished than the A3's, but don't stray into wannabe RS3 territory. For me, its visual restraint sits in a golden space between plain A3 and the slightly overdone top model, and my hope is that the car lives up to those looks.

Our Black Edition TFSI S-tronic is helped by District Green, an optional colour that seems to be oddly divisive. Yours for £595, it's an extraordinary military green blessed with rich gold flecks. It's moody in bad weather but spectacular in the sun.

It can't do much about the S3's uninteresting grille, but it does at least accentuate Ingolstadt's current fondness for precise, creased panels.

On first acquaintance the interior gives less to get excited about. Maybe that's because I've spent time in the A3. Although our S3 gets nappa leather seats and black alcantara-style material on the dash, it feels very similar to the A3 – a perfectly good interior, but a missed opportunity if Audi wants to distinguish the S from the A.

The S3 has a 10.1-inch touchscreen and digital cockpit display. Our car is the Black Edition, which brings features including adaptive cruise, ▶

Familiar, but that doesn't stop it being a very neat cabin

a head-up display and Audi Presense. This particular car also gets the £3050 Technology Pro pack: customisable LED matrix headlights, a panoramic sunroof, lane-change assist and electrically adjustable front seats with a memory function, among other bits. Those all strike me as worthwhile additions. They take our car to a total of £51,135 on the road.

Under the surface, the S3 gets a mixture of hand-me-downs from the outgoing RS3 and a few new bits of its own. The turbocharged inline-four returns, now with more pep thanks to a bump of 23bhp and 15lb ft for a total of 328bhp and 310lb ft. That's good enough for a 0-62mph sprint of 4.7 seconds and a top speed limited to 155mph. That's a small but significant amount slower than the 3.8sec sprint the RS3's 395bhp five-cylinder achieves.

Clever LED headlights part of a £3k pack

A perfectly good interior, but a missed opportunity if Audi wants to distinguish the S from the A

Chassis-wise, the S3 gets new pivot bearings at the bottom of its MacPherson struts that allow more negative camber than before. Grip is increased further over the last car by stiffer wishbone bearings and new tyres.

The S3 is also the beneficiary of a new torque splitter, lifted wholesale from the current RS3: it uses two clutches, one per rear driveshaft, and splits torque between the left and right wheels on a granular level. After assessing the conditions and steering angle in fractions of a second, it can give the rear outside wheel more power for a snappier turn-in.

Put it altogether, and on paper at least the new S3 seems to be another well-engineered product. But is it an exciting new chapter for Audi's often shunned middle child? Has the warm sedan finally found its own groove? So far I've barely driven it around the block, but over the next few months I'm going to find out if this is what the S3 should've been all along.

It's the little things

I don't know what I was expecting (a glowing reactor core?) but pop the bonnet to top up the washer fluid and the scene that greets you is reassuringly normal. Hell, some of the orange high-voltage cable routing even resembles exhaust headers.

Washer fluid topped up, a weekend away revealed the usefulness of chargers on lamp posts. With three available on a quaint High Street, I was able to get on one of them – combustion cars blocked access to the other two. The posts are close to the kerb, so your cable doesn't become a trip hazard, and the steady overnight charge from char.gy (£20.18 for 43.85 kWh) was more affordable and convenient than an Ionity splash-and-dash on the way home.

BEN MILLER

Peugeot E-2008 GT Electric 54kWh
Month 4

The story so far

Crossover aiming to persuade us we don't need a Model Y

+ Stylish; nicely finished; good to drive

- Optimistic on range; pricey

Logbook

Price £40,700 (£42,060 as tested) **Performance** 47.7kWh battery, e-motor, 154bhp, 9.1sec 0-62mph, 93mph **Efficiency** 4.9 miles per kWh (official), 3.9 miles per kWh (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 227-271 miles (official), 183 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 7.0p per mile **Miles this month** 1274 **Total miles** 2561

Tech rescue

Car-connected apps often provide a lot of features you don't want or need. The Mini app means your phone can double as the key – a classic case of answering a question no one ever asked. When did carrying a key become a pain? But as your phone becomes the one-stop shop for your life, I suppose it makes sense. Plus it bailed me out of a hole recently when I left the actual key somewhere else.

The app isn't quite as all-seeing as Tesla's: for example, it can't summon the car out of a parking space. But the design is neat (you can change the background to London's skyline… a bit odd on a car made in China) and does pretty much all you need, like remote control of the air-con; handy as winter sets in.

PIERS WARD

Mini Cooper SE
Month 2

The story so far

Electric three-door proves that Mini still means great handling

+ Decent size for parking in town; real-world efficiency

- Ride quality starting to grate on passengers

Logbook

Price £34,500 (£39,799 as tested) **Performance** 49kWh battery, e-motor, 215bhp, 6.7sec 0-62mph, 106mph **Efficiency** 4.2-4.4 miles per kWh (official), 4.1 miles per kWh (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 240-249 miles (official), 200 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 5.0p per mile **Miles this month** 510 **Total miles** 2395

The full Tic Tac

There's been a lot of talk about the perfect two-car garage around *CAR* recently, and I'd contend that these two make a great pairing, even without their Tic Tac colouring.

The Artura is McLaren's forgotten supercar, which is a shame – it's wonderfully communicative and light compared to a modern 911. The Clio is clearly more practical, but it shares a bit of the McLaren's spirit. They're both playful and chuckable, and while the Artura is blisteringly fast it's not just about speed, it's about feel.

The Clio is definitely not about speed, but if you love driving for driving's sake you'll appreciate its zingy flavour.

I'd be happy with these two. I just need £240,195.

MARK WALTON

Renault Clio TCe 90 Evolution
Month 7

The story so far

If you had to choose a two-car garage, the Clio should be a contender

+ For those who value chuckability over outright speed

- It has zing but not bling

Logbook

Price £17,995 (£18,695 as tested) **Performance** 999cc turbocharged three-cylinder, 89bhp, 12.2sec 0-62mph, 112mph **Efficiency** 54.3mpg (official), 44.3mpg (tested), 118g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 15.9p per mile **Miles this month** 932 **Total miles** 7508

In the spin room

BYD's gimmick across all its UK and European cars is a rotating infotainment screen. There's a physical button for it on the Seal's steering wheel. But the reality is that I show it to passengers when they're new to the car, they make a noise of potentially fake interest, and then I switch it back to widescreen. End of.

The portrait view is useful for using the car's in-built nav, but that's about it, and it becomes even more useless if you mirror your phone screen – CarPlay and Android Auto will only work in widescreen format. That dedicated button would be better for allowing me to switch regenerative braking modes; something the cheaper Dolphin gets but this doesn't.

JAKE GROVES

BYD Seal Excellence
Month 2

The story so far

Our Seal settles in… permanently in widescreen mode

+ High-quality interior; slick tech

- Gimmicky rotating screen; dedicated button could be used for something more useful

Logbook

Price £48,695 (£48,695 as tested) **Performance** 82.5kWh battery, two e-motors, 523bhp, 3.8sec 0-62mph, 112mph **Efficiency** 3.4 miles per kWh (official), 2.83 (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 323 miles (official), 310 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 18.2p per mile **Miles this month** 1324 **Total miles** 6084

Swings, meet roundabouts

Relationships with Alfas get complicated. This is no exception. By **Chris Chilton**

Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio
Month 6

The story so far

More power; better handling; but feeling dated

+ Wheels are still free of kerb rash

- No clever parking tech, so it's all on us

Logbook

Price £87,195 (£90,745 as tested) **Performance** 2891cc twin-turbo V6, 513bhp, 3.8sec 0-62mph, 177mph **Efficiency** 23.9mpg (official), 19.9mpg (tested), 267g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 34.0p per mile **Miles this month** 301 **Total miles** 8998

If you had to make a table listing your car's good and bad points, how even would the columns be? Glancing through the notebook that lives in the Stelvio's door pocket it seems to have generated 'love it!' and 'loathe it' comments in equal measure.

Some of those you could learn on a simple test drive with your Alfa dealer before deciding to pull the pin on an order. Or, less neatly, you might discover them on the way back from picking up that order, knowing you've made your bed and have to lie in it for three years.

But other traits are the sort of thing you only notice after living with a car for several months, as we have.

Take the wheels. They're not the optional 21s, just the standard 20s, but they look fantastic. You don't need to rack up 9000 miles to know that. But one of my favourite things about them, something you only appreciate over a longer test, is how easy they are to clean.

I hate cleaning most alloys wheels; they're often overly fiddly and it annoys me that you can't easily reach the brake calipers to spiv them up without taking the entire wheel off.

That's not a problem on ordinary cars, but it's annoying on performance cars whose brakes are meant to be seen, like the £450 optional red calipers on our car. But the Stelvio's wheel design makes cleaning them a cinch. You can even reach through and clean the backside of the wheel barrel if you want to go full OCD.

Against all odds, because they look very vulnerable, we've so far managed to keep those rims free of kerb rash. Which is down to good luck and old-fashioned use of the side mirror, not because the Stelvio has an ace surround-view parking system. It doesn't, making

The V6 engine is good, not outstanding, but we'll still be sorry to see it go

do instead with simple front and rear parking sensors and a rear-view camera whose image on the centre touchscreen is small and looks like it was shot on a 20-year-old phone.

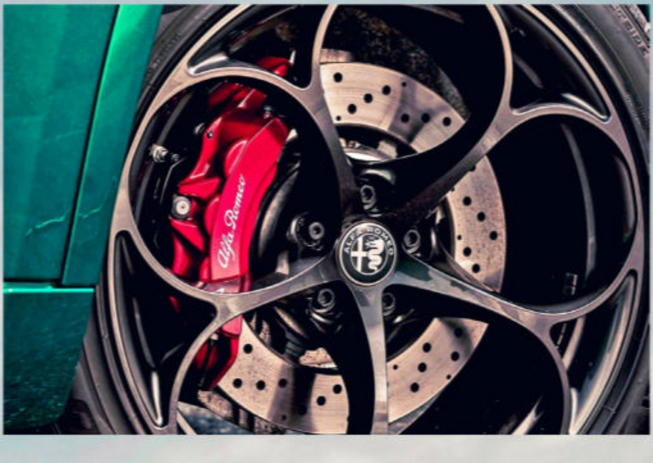
The entire media system feels equally ancient. In size, style and response it's miles behind what you get in a modern German car. Like those rivals, the Stelvio now has a digital instrument pack, though it's not as versatile as some other systems. Switching to Race using the mode dial on the centre console replaces the twin mph and rpm dials with one centrally-located rev counter, a gimmicky g-meter and a welcome splash of extra colour.

It looks better and is easier to read than the default display, but it's a shame you can't enjoy it without Race mode's angrier powertrain map, which adds to the excitement on open roads but makes town driving edgy and jerky. BMW M cars let drivers mix and match their favourite settings and even store two configurations, but you can't do that in the Quadrifoglio.

Newer tech doesn't always mean better. I'm all for the Stelvio's trad gearstick, the rotary heater controls, twirl-able volume knob and circular infotainment wheel. What are the chances of any of that stuff lasting into the next generation of Alfa SUV? Slim, I imagine.

The 2.9-litre V6 won't live on when the Giulia and Stelvio Quadrifoglio are phased out. It's a good engine but not outstanding. The 3.0 straight-six in a BMW X4 M makes only slightly less power (503 versus 513bhp), but more torque (480 versus 443lb ft), sounds better at low speed and gobbles far less fuel while spewing out less CO2. We'll still be sorry to see the 2.9 go.

There are plenty more loves and loathes in the notebook, but they seem to be keeping each other in check. And anyway, it's an Alfa. It's hard to dislike an Alfa no matter how uneven the columns are.



Enjoy physical gearstick while you can

Barry Hayden

It's an Alfa, so you can't expect pure, unadulterated perfection

Taking the psi

Can lower tyre pressures remedy the Swift's dodgy ride? Well… By **Ben Barry**

Suzuki Swift 1.2 Hybrid Ultra
Month 4

The story so far

Latest version of long-running supermini is quite a mixed bag

+ Brilliantly efficient and lively enough

- Ride quality tops the debit column

Logbook

Price £19,799 (£19,799 as tested) **Performance** 1197cc turbocharged three-cylinder, 81bhp, 12.5sec 0-62mph, 103mph **Efficiency** 64.2mpg (official), 60.0mpg (tested), 99g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 10.7p per mile **Miles this month** 1409 **Total miles** 5958

In last month's instalment I noted the Swift's sub-par ride quality, and promised to experiment with deviations from its high factory-spec tyre pressures this month. Perhaps a small adjustment would smooth off the rough edges, I wondered.

Those factory tyre pressures are not crazy high, to be fair, but they are higher than most of the rivals I checked – Suzuki recommends 36psi front and 32psi rear (2.5/2.2 bar) for the Swift's diddy 185/55 R16 rubber with up to three passengers (rising to 41psi/2.8 bar for the rear fully loaded with passengers and luggage).

I thought lowering the pressures by 10 per cent might be a good starting point, but my tyre pressure gauge revealed them to already be in that ballpark when I checked – 32.5psi for both fronts, 29.5psi for both rears. So they've either lost pressure by a very precise amount, or our car's were dropped before it reached us.

I don't want to lower pressures beyond that for fear of adding more fuzz to the handling, so the grating ride remains. Most notably it's a lack of isolation over lateral expansion joints and a shortage of sophistication to the secondary ride, whether I'm dodging potholes in town or holding a 70mph motorway cruise. Poor ride on motorways is perhaps most surprising, given that they're typically smoother surfaces and higher speeds often calm chassis jitters.

Despite the tough ride, the Swift is actually very softly sprung and rolls generously through corners. In fact, I think it needs more roll-support at the rear as much for comfort as handling – two different people have said it feels a little alarming in the rear seats as it topples about on B-roads.

And the handling generally? Well, press on and it has a fail-safe understeery bias – fair enough for a target buyer not necessarily interested in sharp driving dynamics – but it's the daily comfort that's most compromised and most relevant. Given the small wheel size and evidently soft springs, I suspect low-quality dampers.

Lowering tyre pressures, of course, is a great way to lower your fuel economy, but the Swift with its 1.2-litre mild-hybrid three-cylinder continues to be the most frugal car I've ever run, even though its modest power output, just 81bhp, encourages the driver to adopt a flat-to-the-mat approach, especially on some of the quiet lanes

At this price, something's got to give. Pity it's the ride quality

It's so efficient that I'd struggle to spend less on petrol without time-travelling back to 2024

near where I live.

In fact, this month the Swift recorded a 2-3mpg improvement at 60mpg, and though the majority of its 1409 miles were covered on long motorway trips, a decent portion were outside of rush hour with higher average speeds. I wasn't hanging about.

While 60mpg is a little off the official 64.2mpg, it's still so efficient that I'd struggle to spend less on petrol without time-travelling back to a forecourt circa 2004. It also means the tiny 37-litre fuel tank is typically going for 370 miles between fills with a comfortable margin in reserve.

Excellent fuel economy is the most satisfying aspect of running the Swift, but there are other highlights too – crucially just how much space there is inside for one of the shorter cars in this class, measuring as it does just 3860mm from tip to toe. Even with a high seating position, a six-foot-tall driver has inches of headroom, and my teens have room to spare even when I push my seat back. Plus the boot is reasonably accommodating at 265 litres given the pint-sized footprint.

So there's a lot of stuff the Swift does very well indeed, but that ride quality would be top of my hit list for the facelift.

Rich Pearce

Goodbye

Italian for plug-and-play

Time's up for our e-hot hatch after half a year of daily use. By **Tim Pollard**

Abarth 500e Turismo
Month 6

The story so far

500e is an electric hot hatch with a great sense of fun

+ A fizzy pocket rocket that looks a million dollars

- Cramped inside; small battery = short range

Logbook

Price £38,195 (£38,795 as tested) **Performance** 42kWh battery, e-motor, 152bhp, 7.0sec 0-62mph, 96mph **Efficiency** 3.3 miles per kWh (official), 3.4 (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 158 miles (claimed), 143 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 10.5p per mile **Miles this month** 312 **Total miles** 5115

The Abarth 500e was arguably the first electric hot hatch to arrive on the scene, beating the likes of the larger Hyundai Ioniq 5 N, Mini Cooper S and leftfield MG 4 XPower to market. Even after 18 months on sale it remains a rare sight on our roads, however, and that rarity makes spotting one in traffic a treat. They're not hard to identify – they tend to come in a colour palette leaked from Stabilo highlighter pens' R&D department.

I love the look of it: a back-to-basics, fun pocket rocket from the old school, but given a modern makeover with our Poison Blue paintwork and the transplant of an electric drivetrain in place of the outgoing Abarth's 1.4-litre turbocharged petrol engine. It's a fun recipe on paper, and so it proved in daily life over our extended test.

Things improved after an inauspicious start. The first time I drove our blue rollerskate, I took an instant dislike to the Abarth Sound Generator. The company made a real fuss of it at launch and I thought it was ridiculous and ill-judged. I mean, who wants an electric car to blare out an artificial petrol soundtrack so loudly, even at a standstill, that pedestrians would stop and stare? The surprisingly large underfloor speaker was silenced (with some sub-menu difficulty) within 24 hours, never to be heard again. Everything that Hyundai has got right with the 5 N's dynamic sounds, Abarth got wrong.

Silence restored, I got to

Turns out Mini doesn't own go-kart handling

know the Abarth properly. It's fun to drive and I quickly came to admire its pointy go-kart handling and fizzy joie de vivre. This is the core capability that shone brightly throughout our half-year relationship, the trade-off being a firm ride. I drove it back-to-back with the new electric Mini and preferred the handling and performance of the Abarth; it might not be as powerful or quick, but you can access more acceleration, more of the time, and it doesn't torque-steer wildly like the more wayward Mini.

Mind you, you have to be a bit careful deploying all 152bhp, because the range will tumble if you give it the full beans everywhere. It's not terribly inefficient, but a short range was guaranteed by the modest 42kWh battery. Result? It'll barely do much more than 100 miles before a charge is needed and that means you'll either treat the Abarth as simply a city runabout or become familiar with Zapmap and the expense of public charging in Britain. We never saw more than 140 miles on the range meter.

Can we criticise a car for a small battery? I think it's a purchasing decision entered eyes wide open. Small battery? Small range. I averaged 3.4 miles per kilowatt hour over 5115 miles, perhaps reflecting the fun nature of the performance on tap. In a similar fashion, you really shouldn't criticise a small car for being small: I struggled to get my teenage children in the 500e's tiny rear seats and my dog didn't fit. But that's hardly a surprise on a city car that's 3.6 metres long. I drove most of the time one or two up.

Capacity issues aside, I loved everything about it. It's right-sized for zipping around town and those diminutive dimensions made it a joy to thread along narrow country lanes and easy in multi-storey car parks. The alcantara steering wheel and dashboard made it feel special inside and did just enough to distract from what is quite ▶

500e interior lifted by alcantara wheel and dashboard inserts

Those diminutive dimensions made it a joy to thread along narrow country lanes

Pick your Poison Blue: Tim Pollard and his Abarth 500e

Lee Brimble

a plasticky interior. It's generously equipped and our top Turismo spec came with a few toys worthy of a more upmarket car, including wireless phone charging, 360° parking cameras and a swooping panoramic glass roof for an airy cabin.

Nothing broke or went wrong in our half-year test. We had to get it serviced, as the first-year anniversary of registration passed while we had the car, and were impressed by the modest £98 cost, and all four tyres had 5mm of tread left when the car departed. Modest running costs should be balanced against a worrying £15k drop in value in its first year; not a factor if you lease or PCP your car – and it'll make a more attractively priced secondhand purchase, I guess.

It's comfy up front, although I'd have preferred the driver's seat to be six inches lower (you sit too close to the header rail for a curiously pinched, pillar-box view out). Special mention to Fiat's 10-inch Uconnect touchscreen, which was easy to use and mine defaulted to CarPlay on every journey.

One more baffling bit of tech was the electro-pushbutton door handles inside. I don't remember anyone getting in and understanding how to open the door first time.

These are mostly trivial mattes that didn't get in the way of a fun and zesty little car. I enjoyed driving the 500e very much – appreciating especially its well-judged one-pedal calibration, the punchy acceleration and the handling. If you want an electric, zeitgeisty hot hatch with a dollop of character, look no further.

There's been a worrying £15k drop in value – good news if you're buying secondhand

Count the cost

Price new £38,795 **Part exchange** £23,790 **Cost per mile** 10.5p **Cost per mile including depreciation** £3.00

Whatever it was, it isn't now

Transformation complete. Once a laughing stock, then pretty decent, now Skodas are the stuff of dreams. By **Ben Oliver**

When I began testing the modern crop of electric cars – starting with the Nissan Leaf in 2010 – we saw them as urban runabouts. How things have changed. For months, our Skoda Enyaq vRS barely saw a city centre, and instead it's been on regular long motorway trips, and down through France to the Massif Central.

But a slight change in working routine means the Enyaq is now making weekly trips into central London. It's aceing these trips too, though that's mostly down to the refinement shared by all EVs.

The Enyaq does add great seat comfort, easy phone integration, and a thoughtful and practical cabin layout with masses of storage, all of which take on disproportionate importance when you're stuck in traffic for hours. Also, while this might be Skoda's fastest, most powerful production car, it's still a Skoda, and of less concern than something flashier when parked on the street.

Skoda jokes belong in the dustbin of '70s and '80s comedy, of course, but there are still moments when you notice how far this brand has come. One arose recently, when on one of its forays into central London our Enyaq was valet-parked by the staff at The Peninsula. The forecourt of London's first billion-pound hotel is usually occupied by much fancier machinery. But the Enyaq didn't look remotely out of place, and the valets knew that this was the vRS and seemed genuinely excited to have a look around it. I should probably add that I was there to report on an event, rather than stay.

The Enyaq's final urban foray of note was to Tesla UK headquarters in west London with my son to see the first Cybertruck to come to Europe. I wanted a photo of our car next to Elon's maddest vehicle yet, but this one was strictly for display only and kept behind glass in the showroom, leaving the Skoda to stare forlornly at it from without. As the long-suffering son of a motoring journalist, young Tom has seen a few nice cars in his 11 years, but I've never seen him as excited about any car as the Cybertruck. Perhaps, for the coming generation of car buyers, that's a more relevant measure of how far EVs have come: that kids find one more alluring than a combustion-engined hypercar. But when he's my age, I suspect he'll be more excited by the more subtle, practical qualities of an EV like our Enyaq.

Skoda Enyaq Coupe iV vRS
Month 6

The story so far

Skoda EV finally proving its urban chops too

+ Easy, practical company regardless of trip type

- Weird grille; poor brake feel; budget tyres

Logbook

Price £54,155 (£58,800 as tested) **Performance** 77kWh battery, twin e-motors, 5.5sec 0-62mph, 111mph **Efficiency** 3.9 miles per kWh (official), 3.5 miles per kWh (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 336 miles (official), 305 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 8.7p per mile **Miles this month** 802 **Total miles** 8256

THE PENINSULA
KV24 AWC

Squint enough and it looks like he's bowing

No cheering waving crowds, no bunting. Sorry, Ben

Simon Thompson

Flawed cake, fancy icing

For all its glitz, is the electric 5-series estate quite as clever as it thinks it is? By **Ben Whitworth**

There's much to enjoy about i5 ownership. It's utterly intuitive to drive, with superb refinement. The ride quality is impressively relaxed and smooth, with only the worst ruts and ridges disturbing the calm of the cabin. The steering and pedals are perfectly calibrated; the seats delightfully soothing.

Whether it's nosing around town at 20mph or digging deep into its motorway capabilities, you feel protected from the world outside.

The cycle-swallowing loadbay makes me wonder why we flocked toward SUVs when estates offer greater versatility and tend to be more engaging to drive. Then there's the performance. Quick off the mark, married to slingshot in-gear go. And an electro-mechanical brake set-up as adept at low-speed parking manoeuvres as it is at repeatedly hauling down two-and-a-bit tonnes of fast-moving metal.

If you're thinking there's a massive 'but' coming up, you'd be right. Because all this – performance, versatility, comfort – should be an absolute given on a £95,000 premium estate. The 'but' is because I can't shake the feeling that there's too much unnecessarily complex technology and compromised design that's deployed to camouflage some unexceptional qualities.

Let's take the range. BMW quotes a 301-mile range. No matter how timidly I drive it, I've never achieved more than 220 miles on a full charge. That's an 80-mile disconnect between reality and laboratory.

For such a long and wide car with a sprawling 2995mm wheelbase, onboard accommodation is good when it should be palatial. It's bigger than the model it replaces but with the same cargo capacity.

Plenty of the technology is borderline phenomenal, like the outstanding headlamps, the Bowers & Wilkins audio system, the seamless CarPlay hook-up (sounds simple, but not many get it right every time) and the four-zone climate control. But this is countered by technology that I instantly hate, like the enormous touchscreen shotgunned with tiny 'app' icons that are impossible to hit cleanly on the go.

Much of this criticism can be levelled at many EVs – too heavy, too reliant on screens, too optimistic about range, and too focused on showroom flash rather than meaningful technology. But shouldn't a very expensive BMW be two steps ahead of all this?

BMW i5 eDrive40 M Sport Pro Touring
Month 3

The story so far

Impressive, but at this price it should be so much better

+ Refined; family-friendly; fast; comfortable; great headlights

- Huge; 220-mile range between charges; frivolous tech; 2255kg kerbweight

Logbook

Price £78,450 (£94,995 as tested) **Performance** 81.2kWh battery, e-motor, 340bhp, 6.1sec 0-62mph, 120mph **Efficiency** 3.7 miles per kWh (official), 2.7 miles per kWh (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 301 miles (official), 215 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 2.8p per mile **Miles this month** 992 **Total miles** 2484

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HOW DOES GBU WORK?
CAR's road testers highlight what's so good about the best cars in every class... and what could be better

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly: The Top 5s

TOP 5 HOT HATCHES

The hot hatch is dead? Far from it

1

GIANT TEST WINNER

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

THE GOOD: Feel, feedback, focus: a phenomenal full-sized hot hatch

THE BAD: Now £50,050 for a front-drive hatchback with barely any more power than before

THE UGLY: Probably the last of its kind; good job it's one of the best

THE ONE TO BUY: There's just the one model; £459 a month on a three-year PCP with an £11k deposit

2

GIANT TEST WINNER

TOYOTA GR YARIS

THE GOOD: A modern-day rally homologation special that's thrilling to drive

THE BAD: Road noise like a death-metal gig; joke rear seats

THE UGLY: Long waiting list, even with some versions priced at £60,000, although it starts at £44,250

THE ONE TO BUY: Now has optional auto but go for the manual

3

GIANT TEST WINNER

HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N

THE GOOD: Electric gets exciting – synthetic drive modes and gearchange are game changers

THE BAD: Ignore that it's software-driven – the car feels real

THE UGLY: £65k!

THE ONE TO BUY: Paint and a sunroof are the only options – all the drive modes are included. It's £855 a month for four years

4

JUST UPDATED

AUDI RS3

THE GOOD: Want a five-cylinder hot hatch? Your option is RS3, with five or four doors

THE BAD: Now £60k; small boot for both

THE UGLY: It's better than before, but improved S3 looks like superior value

THE ONE TO BUY: £60,105 for the hatch; an extra grand for the saloon

5

NEW ENTRY

VW GOLF GTI CLUBSPORT

THE GOOD: Rare mix of supreme comfort, hatchback versatility and cornering bite

THE BAD: The stats don't really shine in a 2025 context

THE UGLY: Mk8.5 a definite improvement, but interface still offers plenty to gripe about

THE ONE TO BUY: £42,155 for a very good Golf is pretty decent value

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TOP 5 SPORTS CARS

911 Carrera 2 one hell of an entry-level model

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

PORSCHE 911

THE GOOD: Exquisite blend of power, accuracy, excitement, style and usability, and new GTS integrates hybrid beautifully

THE BAD: You have to look down to #3 in this category to see the affordable performance Porsche; 911 barely scrapes in at just under £100k

THE UGLY: It keeps getting bigger and heavier

THE ONE TO BUY: That basic Carrera is ace, and it's hard to imagine you'll regret it for a minute. But if you want more power and more trickery then Porsche has plenty of ways to take more of your money

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

ARIEL ATOM

THE GOOD: A beautiful object as well as a thrilling drive; think of it as a modernised Lotus Seven crossed with a high-end sportsbike

THE BAD: You'll need bike-style wet-weather gear if it's raining. And at least £40k – this is an expensive toy, if a captivating one

THE UGLY: The 4R is even more bonkers

THE ONE TO BUY: Do you really need the 350bhp power upgrade option?

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

PORSCHE 718 CAYMAN/BOXSTER

THE GOOD: Sublime handling; surprising practicality

THE BAD: Less characterful than an Alpine; such an obvious choice it's almost boring

THE UGLY: Flat-four versions sound like a VW Beetle in a duet with Eeyore

THE ONE TO BUY: GT4 RS the most thrilling, Spyder is ace, but flat-six GTS 4.0 is a cut-price GT4 at £75k

4

LOTUS EMIRA

THE GOOD: The first new combustion Lotus in years is fantastically well resolved. Usable, desirable and thrilling

THE BAD: Harder work to live with than a Cayman

THE UGLY: The last petrol Lotus – just as the company gets the financial stability to build on its brilliance

THE ONE TO BUY: AMG-sourced four is an interesting but pricey addition

5

ALPINE A110

THE GOOD: The perfectly formed antidote to a world of excess; a modern classic in every sense of the term

THE BAD: Two boots, neither big, and not much oddment storage inside

THE UGLY: 'R' is 34kg lighter – some effort – but also nearly £100k. Too much

THE ONE TO BUY: A110 S adds handling poise for £67,490 but £54,490 base A110 is all you need

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TOP 5 GRAND TOURERS

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

FERRARI ROMA

THE GOOD: Style, speed and sensuous lines; a car for, and from, a bygone age

THE BAD: An age in which we no longer live, tragically

THE UGLY: Baffling steering-wheel touchpads; strangled exhaust note

THE ONE TO BUY: The cabrio. Arguably even more beautiful, until you sit in it, that is

2

BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT

THE GOOD: Luxury, power, agility and a great-looking body

THE BAD: Nope, it's really sorted

THE UGLY: Just because it's always been heavy and thirsty won't stop us complaining that it's heavy and thirsty

THE ONE TO BUY: New plug-in range-topper is the most powerful Bentley ever, and so much more besides

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

PORSCHE 911 TURBO

THE GOOD: Hypercar-bothering pace, any road, any weather

THE BAD: Only fun when you're really going for it

THE UGLY: Turbo has never been good for depreciation; even less so recently

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry car plenty fast enough but £180,600 Turbo S outsells it; add £10k for a Convertible

EV CHOICE

4

PORSCHE TAYCAN CROSS TURISMO

THE GOOD: Raised ride height absolutely monsters lumpy UK roads

THE BAD: Not actually that practical

THE UGLY: Audi's e-Tron GT gets the nicer cockpit

THE ONE TO BUY: Revised versions has arrived, along with revised prices: 4S Cross Turismo is now £100,400, and range hits £162k

5

ASTON MARTIN DB12

THE GOOD: Effortlessly beautiful DB11 replacement now has the traction to make the most of the rampant turbo V8's stomp. Excellent new interior

THE BAD: Overshadowed by the success of DBX

THE UGLY: Aston simply doesn't do ugly

THE ONE TO BUY: Coupe is £185k; Volante the stunner

TOP 5 COUPES AND CABRIOS

1

BMW M2

THE GOOD: The longitudinal-engined two-door BMW coupe lives

THE BAD: Bigger and heavier than we'd like but outrageous fun

THE UGLY: You need £66k to get involved; steering a shade rubbery

THE ONE TO BUY: Manual or auto transmission options – get the knob. We'd go M carbon seats, too

2

MASERATI MC20

THE GOOD: A no-excuses excellent Maserati. Handling and ride to match the looks; a GT as well as a sports car

THE BAD: Throttle could be sharper in normal mode

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you did mean to buy the Maser and not the 296

THE ONE TO BUY: The droptop Cielo. All the coupe's go with added style

3

MERCEDES-AMG SL

THE GOOD: Latest SL is developed by AMG but it's still a cruiser, and all the better for it

THE BAD: Engines are still better than the ride and handling

THE UGLY: Cabin designed by touchpad scattergun

THE ONE TO BUY: The £148k, 469bhp SL55; also look at the coupe cousin, the AMG GT

4

MAZDA MX-5

THE GOOD: Closest thing to a modern-day Lotus Elan; genius folds-flat-in-seconds roof

THE BAD: Lashings of bodyroll; the 1.5 can't climb hills

THE UGLY: If you're over 6ft tall you simply won't fit

THE ONE TO BUY: Motorised-metal-roof RF doesn't quite make sense; 1.5 starts at £28k, punchier 2.0 from £32k with an LSD

5

ASTON MARTIN VANQUISH

THE GOOD: Fast and comfortable, and utterly gorgeous

THE BAD: Gets very thirsty without too much provocation

THE UGLY: DB12 and Vantage are also very good

THE ONE TO BUY: £333,000 will get you a very fine long, low, two-seat sports car/GT/near-supercar coupe

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUPERCARS

FERRARI 296 GTB

THE GOOD: Timeless styling and a driving experience as good as any of Maranello's finest

THE BAD: You need reflexes like a fighter pilot to drive it as fast as it can go

THE UGLY: Touch-sensitive steering-wheel pads make the interface borderline unusable

THE ONE TO BUY: Fiorano pack is £25k+ overkill. GTS adds sunshine

PORSCHE 911 GT3 RS

THE GOOD: Spine-tingling sound; 9000rpm redline; total immersion

THE BAD: Nothing to see here

THE UGLY: Getting on the waiting list is like winning both *The X Factor* and *The Apprentice*

THE ONE TO BUY: RS is somehow more focused than the GT3 but more road-compliant at the same time. How do they do it?

LAMBORGHINI REVUELTO

THE GOOD: The monstrous, naturally-aspirated V12 lives on – now e-boosted and wrapped in such a hard-to-crash package insurance should be a tenner. Vastly improved cabin, too

THE BAD: Price has skyrocketed

THE UGLY: EV-only range is six miles

THE ONE TO BUY: There is only one for now

McLAREN 750S

THE GOOD: Lighter, more powerful, better: evolution of 720S is another corker from Woking

THE BAD: 30 per cent new but you'd struggle to tell

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you actually bought the new car

THE ONE TO BUY: Stick to the comfort-spec seats and avoid the harnesses on the top 'super carbon' ones

CHEVROLET CORVETTE Z06

THE GOOD: A beautifully balanced performance package that can stand tall among the supercar aristocracy

THE BAD: Interior quality and kit not quite there

THE UGLY: Will future electrification kill the thrill?

THE ONE TO BUY: Add the Z07 pack for upgraded aero, suspension, brakes and wheels; expect to pay £140k

TOP 5 PLUG-IN HYBRIDS

GIANT TEST WINNER

BMW X5 50e

THE GOOD: Massive 67-mile official e-range; horizon-eating performance

THE BAD: Hybrid hardware cuts into boot space to the tune of 150 litres; no seven-seat option

THE UGLY: Not much now that the facelifted 50e model with more e-range and power is here

THE ONE TO BUY: This one, for £82k

FORD KUGA

THE GOOD: Facelift has brought better efficiency, and it still drives very well

THE BAD: Electric-only range isn't great, although fuel consumption's good

THE UGLY: Not so much ugly as dowdy, particularly the interior – not a patch on the electric Explorer

THE ONE TO BUY: PHEV in ST-Line X trim can be had for £39,755

PORSCHE CAYENNE

THE GOOD: Handling; driver focus; choice of body styles; 0-62mph in 5.0sec

THE BAD: Bigger battery for facelift model but still can't match the X5

THE UGLY: The front passenger touchscreen: £1000 and not needed

THE ONE TO BUY: If you value the U in SUV, avoid the coupe – even if it is a great steer

VOLKSWAGEN TIGUAN

THE GOOD: Mk3 is bigger than ever but still a neat all-round package. Choice of 201 and 268bhp PHEVs, both with 62-mile e-range

THE BAD: Room for improvement with the infotainment

THE UGLY: People are buying Tiguans instead of Golfs, in huge numbers

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for either of the eHybrids in good-value Match trim

BMW 330e

THE GOOD: Goes sub-six to 62mph and up to 41 electric miles on a charge

THE BAD: Engine is slightly coarse; plain 330i is less heavy, more fun

THE UGLY: Hybrid kit eats into boot space so regular 3s are roomier

THE ONE TO BUY: Choice of saloon or estate. Handsome, vaguely affordable 330e Sport Touring is £48,785

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TOP 5 ELECTRIC CARS

EV powertrain is very good; the entire package is even better

GIANT TEST WINNER

PORSCHE TAYCAN

THE GOOD: The EV that's best to drive has been thoroughly overhauled and retains its top slot: still fast, responsive and fluid; now more efficient

THE BAD: Info screen in front of the passenger is faintly ridiculous

THE UGLY: Prices are all up

THE ONE TO BUY: As before, three body styles to choose from: saloon, estate or raised estate. Prices start at £86.5k for the rear-drive basic Taycan; you can pay a lot more and get a bit more performance as you work your way up the range

TESLA MODEL 3

THE GOOD: The alternatives keep getting better, but the Model 3's mix of range, driving pleasure and ease of use remains formidable

THE BAD: Stop nicking the switches

THE UGLY: That queasiness around Elon Musk

THE ONE TO BUY: Revised Performance really is fab; less powerful single-motor, rear-drive entry model is £20k less at £40k, but we'd pick the £50k Long Range bi-motor

KIA EV6

THE GOOD: Design inside and out, with cabin materials and tech to match the design; efficient performance; potential for rapid charging; it's practical and good value

THE BAD: Kia's rather long waiting list

THE UGLY: The high-powered GT isn't as good as we wanted it to be

THE ONE TO BUY: You'll need £49,250 for a RWD GT-Line, or £817 a month for three years, and no deposit

MG 4

THE GOOD: Incredible value and remarkably good fun to drive – the EV hatch's Focus moment

THE BAD: Poundland Lamborghini Urus vibes, especially in orange

THE UGLY: How do you feel about driving an MG-badged hatchback from a Chinese-state-owned parent company?

THE ONE TO BUY: Not the XPower. Four versions are currently offered with zero per cent APR on PCP

CITROËN E-C3

THE GOOD: Cute and comfortable, like a 2CV; well equipped, unlike a 2CV

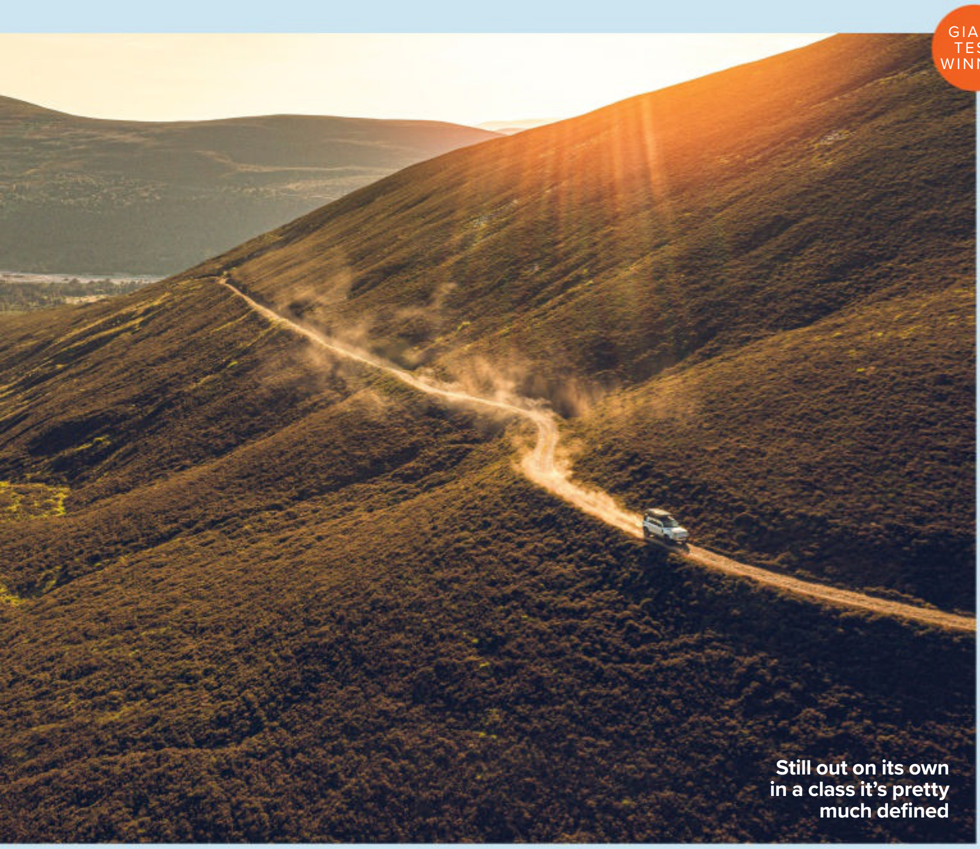
THE BAD: Real-world range of 160-ish miles limits its usefulness

THE UGLY: Boot isn't big and isn't well shaped; that's the sort of thing Citroën traditionally excels at

THE ONE TO BUY: New C3 range starts at a good-value £21,990, but the impressive electric e-C3 is a modest £1700 on top of that, which feels like progress

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUVs/CROSSOVERS



Still out on its own in a class it's pretty much defined

1

GIANT TEST WINNER

LAND ROVER DEFENDER

THE GOOD: Reboot brings untold dynamic improvements wherever you drive

THE BAD: Second-row access is a pain in the 90; expensive; 130 in particular is very big, so parking can be tricky

THE UGLY: Very nice inside, so you're wary of getting it muddy

THE ONE TO BUY: Range spans 90, 110 and 130 bodies, with significantly different dimensions but remarkably similar character and the genuine off-road ability that Land Rover always delivers so convincingly. Heart says petrol V8 90, head/wallet say diesel-six D250 110

2

EV CHOICE

PORSCHE MACAN

THE GOOD: The new one is electric – and as impressive as the outgoing combustion version

THE BAD: As family transport it has its shortcomings, especially boot space

THE UGLY: If you want an engine you'll need to be quick

THE ONE TO BUY: Starts at £67k and goes up to £95k for the Turbo; £70k 4 offers all you could sensibly want

3

GIANT TEST WINNER

ASTON MARTIN DBX 707

THE GOOD: Now with a much improved interior, the DBX keeps the glorious noise, masterful balance, rear-axle bias and surprising practicality

THE BAD: High fuel consumption and emissions from the twin-turbo V8

THE UGLY: There's no longer a non-707 version, so you need to pay top dollar

THE ONE TO BUY: The 707 will cost you around £210k

4

MERCEDES G-CLASS

THE GOOD: Rejigged range spans diesel, petrol, AMG and EV, and they're all good: agile off-road, smooth and comfy on-road

THE BAD: It's all a bit fancy; how do you feel about muddy wellies?

THE UGLY: Merc's premium mission means it's a posh version or nothing

THE ONE TO BUY: Electric is astonishingly good, but painfully expensive at £180k-plus

5

INEOS QUARTERMASTER

THE GOOD: Pick-up version of the Grenadier has a long wheelbase that if anything improves the handling

THE BAD: Not very roomy for passengers

THE UGLY: Isuzus are much cheaper

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £66k, but a Trialmaster edition at £74k brings together a practical and good-looking set of extras

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TOP 5 LUXURY CARS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

RANGE ROVER

THE GOOD: Masterful and hugely desirable reinvention of an icon. An EV version is due soon

THE BAD: Reliability remains a worry. EV could be v v heavy

THE UGLY: The D350 mild-hybrid straight-six diesel is sublime. Can you live with the guilt?

THE ONE TO BUY: The above (from £107k), though the V8 is fun

ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM

THE GOOD: Money-no-object pinnacle of serenity and craftsmanship

THE BAD: Is this really you? And is this really appropriate in 2024?

THE UGLY: Filthy-money associations

THE ONE TO BUY: It's 'standard' or long-wheelbase, from £380k. All cars are built to order and most owners spend £500k

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

MERCEDES S-CLASS

THE GOOD: Tech-fest with timeless waftability. Few cars are more calming

THE BAD: Surprisingly unrefined petrol six; doesn't ride as well as it should

THE UGLY: Trying not to crash while using the Hyperscreen

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid 580e works best. That's £114k in entry AMG Line Premium trim

BENTLEY FLYING SPUR

THE GOOD: The definitive modern limo: effortless and engaging. New one is about to arrive, minus the W12

THE BAD: That W12 is fast but short on soul; hybrid V6 a bit lame; go V8

THE UGLY: Air of feigned aristocracy

THE ONE TO BUY: V6 hybrid starts at £180k, before the limitless options

ROLLS-ROYCE SPECTRE

THE GOOD: A joy to drive, and exquisitely built

THE BAD: Efficiency not great

THE UGLY: Fabulous detailing and engineering will benefit so few

THE ONE TO BUY: It's £330k in theory, but in reality, as every one is spec'd from a large and flexible options list, it's going to cost you more than £400,000

TOP 5 FAMILY CARS

BIG SELLER
1

BMW 3-SERIES

THE GOOD: On-the-deck driving position; dreamy handling balance; slick interior

THE BAD: Knowing you've made the obvious choice

THE UGLY: You'll need an M340i or M340d for six cylinders

THE ONE TO BUY: 330e if you want a hybrid; 320i if you're on a budget

GIANT TEST WINNER
2

BMW 5-SERIES

THE GOOD: Much has changed; still great. Handling defines the class

THE BAD: It's grown to become a very hefty car

THE UGLY: Is nowhere safe? Even the tradition-embracing 5-series gets a full EV option in the form of the i5

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £51,915 for the 520i but can easily exceed £80k

DACIA JOGGER

THE GOOD: Seven seats; massive boot with the rear row removed; prices start just over £18k

THE BAD: Sandero base means it's a bit narrow; spartan

THE UGLY: Low Euro NCAP score, although it's pretty safe in a crash

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid usefully punchier than petrol, but much clunkier. PCP a steal at £166 a month

VOLKSWAGEN ID. 7

THE GOOD: The most coherent ID to date now in a choice of hatch and estate. Not posh, but highly agreeable

THE BAD: Frumpy styling and that still sub-par interface

THE UGLY: So few electric estates to choose from

THE ONE TO BUY: Pro Match with 77kWh battery does the job just fine, priced from £51,500 for the hatch

SKODA KODIAQ

THE GOOD: New version builds on the Mk1's strengths: roomy, comfortable, decent value

THE BAD: Not the most responsive steering

THE UGLY: Awkwardly, the diesel is the best engine

THE ONE TO BUY: Range starts at £26,645, but the smart choice is the 2.0-litre TDI in SE trim at £38,805

TOP 5 FAMILY HATCHES

BMW 1-SERIES

THE GOOD: Premium and practical, and a lot more normal than the original 1-series

THE BAD: Actually a bit too normal for some tastes

THE UGLY: Facelift has dialled down the ugly, thankfully

THE ONE TO BUY: Choice of £30k mild-hybrid front-drive 120 and £41k all-wheel-drive 296bhp M135; very different, both good

PEUGEOT 208

THE GOOD: Style; big-car character; knockout interior; EV version available

THE BAD: So-so handling; a squash for adult rear-seat passengers

THE UGLY: Dumping the wheel in your lap like a TV dinner to see the dials clearly

THE ONE TO BUY: Range from £21k, but £26k GT is worth saving up for. Bright colour is best

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

MINI COUNTRYMAN

THE GOOD: Wonderful interior and all-round feelgood factor from big new five-door

THE BAD: You need to be in the mood for the built-in zaniness

THE UGLY: Options can send the price into the stratosphere

THE ONE TO BUY: Your basic Countryman C Classic is just fine at a sniff under £30k

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

THE GOOD: Brain-out default choice still a solid all-rounder; ride, visibility, roominess

THE BAD: Seat Leon a very similar package for a lower price

THE UGLY: Revised Mk8.5 version imminent, so supplies are patchy

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 TSI 150 at £300pcm or £28k; roomy estate is also great value

RENAULT CLIO

THE GOOD: Still fun to drive, and pretty practical for young families

THE BAD: Not actually very quick

THE UGLY: An even simpler, more basic version would be welcome

THE ONE TO BUY: No need to go higher than the base Evolution spec and an 89bhp TCE 90 three-cylinder engine, yours for £18k/£191 a month

TOP 5 SPORTS SALOONS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

BMW M3/M4 COMPETITION

THE GOOD: Mighty straight-six; front axle's never-give-up attitude; dreamy chassis balance

THE BAD: No manual; nearly 911 money now

THE UGLY: M3 Touring £88k new but now changing hands for much less

THE ONE TO BUY: The CS, if you were lucky enough to bag one of the 100 brought here. Used Touring is a good secondhand buy

MERCEDES-AMG S63

THE GOOD: V8 plus e-motor shows AMG can do a great performance hybrid, and in the most unlikely of places: a huge luxury saloon

THE BAD: Boot size suffers, and ride quality isn't perfect

THE UGLY: It's a pity this approach wasn't applied to the new C63

THE ONE TO BUY: Two versions, both at £189k, one with more black trim

BMW M5

THE GOOD: Very rapid, ridiculously agile and refreshingly low on emissions; a clever reboot in PHEV form

THE BAD: Lots of modes, and an odd amount of wind noise

THE UGLY: Heavy and expensive, so it's not that clever

THE ONE TO BUY: £113,405 for the Touring; £2k less for the saloon

ALFA GIULIA QUADRIFOGLIO

THE GOOD: Charisma in spades, fantastic agility and almost as good as an M3 to drive

THE BAD: Emphasis on *almost* as good as an M3 to drive

THE UGLY: Flaky interior quality; infotainment still lags behind the best

THE ONE TO BUY: There's just the one, wonderful, model from £79,495/£699pcm

PORSCHE PANAMERA

THE GOOD: New version builds on success of the very fine model it replaces

THE BAD: Barely a saloon – four-up is okay, but forget five

THE UGLY: Estate version is no longer available, even though it was the best looker

THE ONE TO BUY: £79,500 gets the base model; Turbo E-Hybrid at £141k now tops the range

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Cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer, Minimum warranty duration 12 months, Excluding Lite policies. Free breakdown cover can only be redeemed on local recovery. Offer ends 31.01.25

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NEW FORMENTOR
321 NLD
CUPRA

WHAT YOU FEEL
IS CALLED OBSESSION

This isn't love, this is obsession. You'll know it when you can't stop thinking about the visionary and innovative tech, or the intuitive radical design, like our illuminated rear logo. Because once you see the new CUPRA Formentor, you won't stop seeing it.

Official fuel consumption for Formentor e-HYBRID range mpg & litres/100km combined: 470.8 (0.4) – 706.2 (0.6). Combined CO_2 emissions 9 – 13 (g/km). Figures shown are for comparability purposes; only compare fuel consumption figures with other vehicles tested to the same technical procedures. Figures may not reflect real life driving results. Data correct at 22/08/2024.